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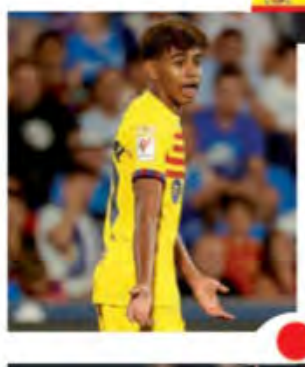

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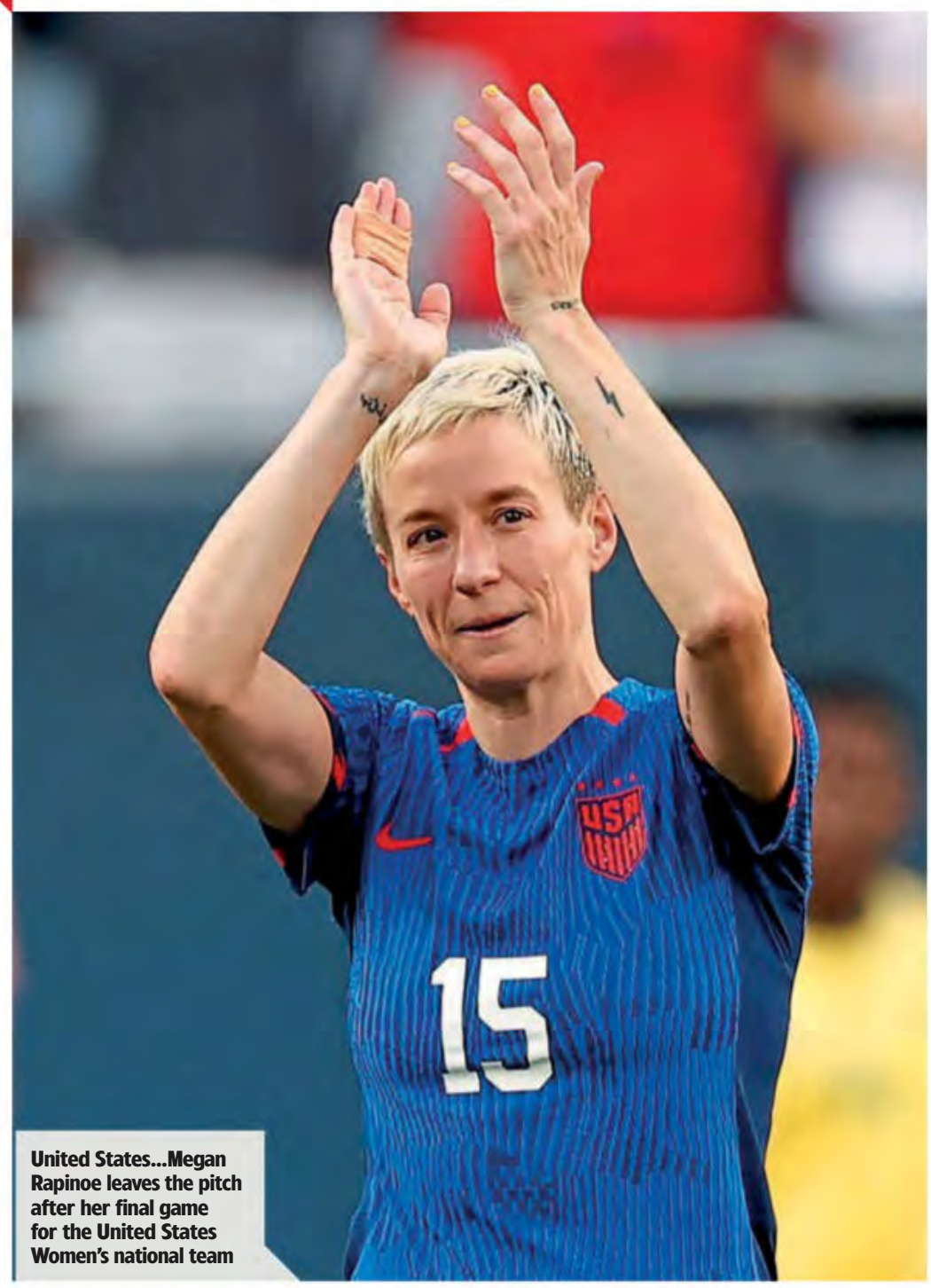
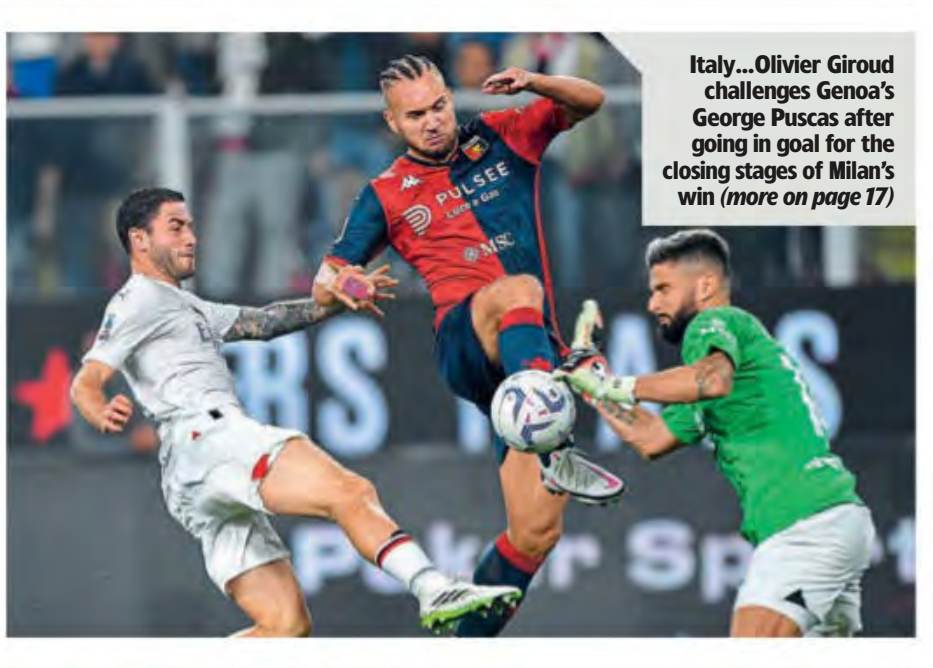


United States...Megan Rapinoe leaves the pitch after her final game for the United States Women's national team

Australia...Sydney FC lift the Australia Cup, the tournament curtain-raiser to the A-League *(more on pages 30, 34 and 80)*

Ecuador...Liga de Quito defender Daykol Romero gives his shirt to a fan after helping his team reach the Copa Sudamericana final *(more on page 22)*

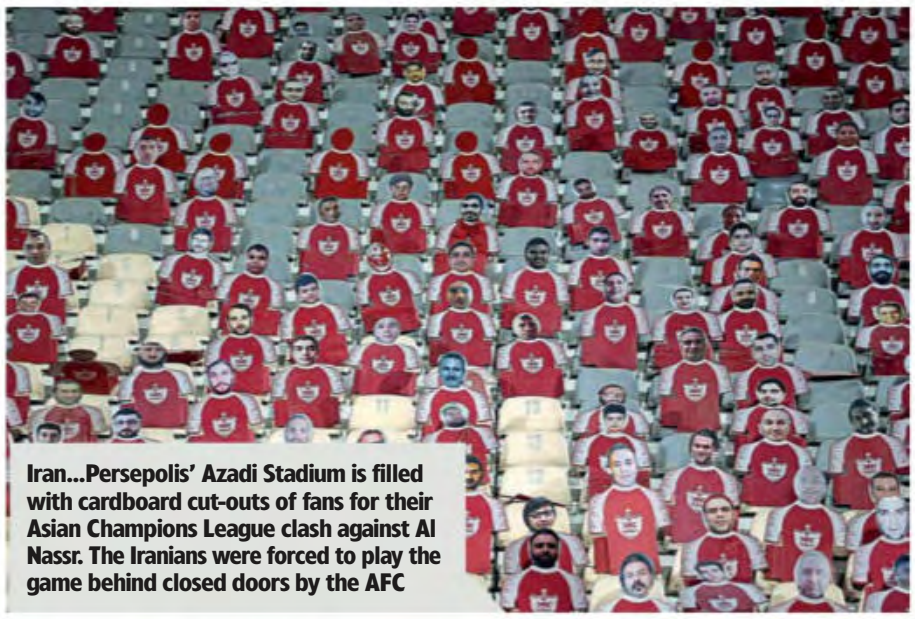
Indonesia...mourners mark the one-year anniversary of the Kanjuruhan Stadium disaster by starting fires on the pitch of the abandoned ground



Italy...Olivier Giroud challenges Genoa's George Puscas after going in goal for the closing stages of Milan's win *(more on page 17)*

Argentina...an aerial view of the Bombonera before Boca Juniors' 2-0 defeat to rivals River Plate in the *Superclasico* *(more on Boca on page 38)*

Netherlands...flares are thrown onto the Johan Cruyff Arena pitch, leading to Ajax's clash with Feyenoord to be abandoned. The Eredivisie game was later finished behind closed doors with Feyenoord winning 4-0



Iran...Persepolis' Azadi Stadium is filled with cardboard cut-outs of fans for their Asian Champions League clash against Al Nassr. The Iranians were forced to play the game behind closed doors by the AFC

Italy...Lazio keeper Ivan Provedel heads home a dramatic equaliser v Atletico Madrid in the Champions League

Saudi Arabia...USM Alger lift the African Super Cup after beating Egyptian giants and African champions Al Ahly

Germany...Bayern Munich's DFB-Pokal tie with Preussen Munster is interrupted by protesting fans throwing tennis balls onto the pitch. The game had been postponed by a month due to a clash with the German Super Cup

Brazil...Sao Paulo fans watch on at the Morumbi stadium as their club win the Copa do Brasil for the first time in its history

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FROM THE EDITOR

Whether by accident or design, most issues of *World Soccer* tend to be themed in one way or another, and this month's edition undoubtedly carries a certain theme to it too; players or clubs emerging from the shadows to showcase their full potential, understudies no longer content with underdog status.

The foremost instance is this month's player biography. After playing an important but somewhat secondary role at treble winners Manchester City last season, Argentina forward Julian Alvarez has been exceptional in 2023-24, and the bright young talent now looks set for superstardom. Joel Richards tracks his rise from fledgling prospect at River Plate to World Cup winner and now "almost undroppable" superstar, according to Pep Guardiola.

Sporting Clube de Braga are another example of a rising power, and Tom Kundert's exclusive club focus on the well-run outfit from northern Portugal emphasises how, after years of living in the shadow of Benfica, Sporting and Porto, Braga are now beginning to match the "Big Three" on and off the pitch. With detailed pen pics of their squad, an interview with club president Antonio Salvador, stunning images of their photogenic stadium, and a deep analysis of their strategy and growth over the past 20 years, it really is a must read.

Bright young talent Julian Alvarez now looks set for superstardom

And the examples don't stop there. African goal machines Victor Boniface and Serhou Guirassy are pulling up trees in Germany's Bundesliga, this month's instalment of Talent Scout highlights a selection of breakout stars (headlined by Barcelona prodigy Lamine Yamal), Brazilian clubs Fluminense and Fortaleza are aiming to win their first Libertadores and Sudamericana crowns respectively as we preview South America's two continental club finals, and Andorra legend Ildefons Lima profoundly sums up his extraordinary 26-year international career by proclaiming: "I wasn't phenomenal with my feet like Messi, but I played with my soul".

With eyewitness reports from the United States – where the US Open Cup continues to thrive despite being a lesser-known representation of US soccer in comparison to MLS – and Australia – where Samindra Kunti focuses on Central Coast Mariners, a community club defying the odds as defending A-League champions – the theme continues heavy, before being bookended in World Service with dispatches from Myanmar, where Shan United's three-year unbeaten run recently came to an end.

With the Africa Cup of Nations and Asian Cup just around the corner, it would be remiss of us not to include some coverage on those tournaments too. Mark Gleeson interviews Namibia coach Collin Benjamin ahead of the AFCON kick-off, while Mike Plastow shines the spotlight on Japan in anticipation of Qatar hosting another major finals. Be sure to catch next month's issue as well, where we'll continue our countdown to both competitions with more detailed analysis.

Stephen Fishlock, Group Editor

FIFA

Six countries to host 2030 World Cup

The 2030 World Cup will be spread across six countries and three continents, the FIFA Council confirmed in October.

In tribute to the centenary of the first World Cup, the opening match is set to take place in Uruguay at Montevideo's Centenario, the venue for the 1930 final, with Argentina and Paraguay also hosting a game. After that, the rest of the competition will shift across the Atlantic to Spain, Portugal and Morocco. All plans are subject to a successful bidding process and FIFA Congress sign-off.

The ramifications for these announcements are significant. With CONMEBOL, UEFA and CAF all involved in 2030, and CONCACAF hosting in 2026, the 2034 finals can now only be played in Asia or Oceania. Saudi Arabia are strong favourites to win the race, with their only potential obstacle coming from Australia, who have until the end of October to confirm their interest. As with this year's Women's World Cup, which was co-hosted with New Zealand, an Australian bid would likely involve support from another nation, with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore possible options.

In other hosting news, the UK and Ireland will host the 2028 European Championship after the last remaining rival bid, from Turkey, withdrew in order to focus on joining forces in a combined bid with Italy for the 2032 finals, which was also confirmed by UEFA. Nine cities

"Simply wonderful to watch. A world-class footballer who gave us that sense that this was a player who could do pretty much anything with a ball at his feet"

Chelsea pay tribute to Eden Hazard who announced his retirement from football aged 32

Historic... Montevideo's Estadio Centenario

– London, Cardiff, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Newcastle, Glasgow, Dublin and Belfast – formed the winning bid for Euro 2028, with Wembley poised to host the final.

Elsewhere, CAF announced that the 2025 AFCON will be played in Morocco – replacing Guinea, who were stripped of hosting rights last October due to concerns over facilities and infrastructure – in a dress rehearsal for the 2030 World Cup. The 2027 competition was also confirmed, with the finals set to be played in East Africa for the first time since 1976 after a successful joint-bid from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

Euro 2028 UK & Ireland rubber-stamped...UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin alongside Wales legend Gareth Bale

Winning AFCON bid...CAF president Patrice Motsepe reveals the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations host countries

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month...

Thrashing... Newcastle players during their 8-0 win

8
Different goalscorers in Newcastle's 8-0 rout of Sheffield United – a Premier League first.

70,000
Proposed capacity for Milan's new home stadium in the south of the city, with the club aiming to leave the San Siro soon.

11
Matches that it took for Cheltenham Town to score their first League One goal this season – a joint-English Football League record.

17
Durand Cups won by Mohun Bagan, the most by any side. The Indian cup competition is the oldest club tournament in Asia.

14
Days that it took UEFA to back down from its plans to reintegrate Russia's Under-17s into its competitions following strong opposition from numerous national football associations.

13
Age of Sacramento Republic attacker Da'vian Kimbrough, who became the youngest player to feature in a professional game in the US.

7
Goals Roma scored v Empoli. The 7-0 rout equals the record for the biggest Serie A victory since three points for a win came into force in 1994.

54,115
The attendance for Arsenal's opening-day defeat to Liverpool at the Emirates Stadium, which set a new Women's Super League record.

$14.4m
The total prize money announced by CAF for the inaugural African Football League, with the winning team receiving $4 million.

15
Members of the Ludogorets backroom staff that offered their resignations following the Bulgarian side's 7-1 defeat to Norsdjaelland in the Europa Conference League.

4
PSG players handed suspended one-match bans for offensive chants following their 4-0 thrashing of *Le Classique* rivals Marseille.

16
Years that coach Franck Schmidt has been in charge of Bundesliga side Heidenheim, a new record for German football.

38
Age of Cheltenham defender Curtis Davies following his first call-up to the Sierra Leone national team, the country of his father's birth.

17
Number of European games West Ham were unbeaten after seeing off Freiburg in the Europa League – a new record for an English team.

6
Saint Kitts & Nevis Premier League titles won by Village Superstars after they beat St. Paul's United 8-7 on penalties following a 0-0 draw.

1
Copas do Brasil won by Sao Paulo after they lifted the trophy for the first time, beating Flamengo 2-1 over two legs in the final.

Winners... Sao Paulo goalscorer Jonathan Calleri lifts the trophy

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

The club-ownership battleground

Everton are the latest English club with an uncertain future in the directors' box

Who owns association football? The competing claims for how and where it all began, from ancient China to Pharaonic Egypt to the comparatively recent Anglo-Saxon Middle Ages, are well-rehearsed, while FIFA and UEFA continue to battle both each other and their scandals in the quest for supremacy.

Further down the feeding chain, but with direct relevance to every supporter, is the club-ownership battleground: an ever-growing gaggle of investors claiming a tranche of both the perceived wealth on offer and the accompanying kudos.

The corporate attraction is obvious. For example, the English Premier League is launching its domestic TV rights tender for three or four years running from 2025. The target is a significant increase on the current £5 billion package through more live matches via greater fixtures flexibility. No wonder United States investors are buzzing like bees around a honeypot. If the Miami investor 777 Partners is cleared to buy Everton then half the Premier League will be in US hands.

Remember that the Premier League was created in the early 1990s for a business community in thrall to the populist free-market ideology of the era. It's been one of the few successful survivors, too, as cracks emerge literally, economically and socially.

The Glazers at Manchester United, Kroenkes at Arsenal and FSG at Liverpool are among those capitalising on Premier League largesse. This explains both the ever-lengthening queue at the door and the need for the league to sharpen its owners' and directors' test. The most recent revision added government sanctions as a disqualifying event as well as an expanded list of criminal offences including violence, corruption, fraud, tax evasion, hate crimes and human rights abuse.

Newcastle United beat the change of rules with the 2021 takeover by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund. At least, whatever any repugnance aroused by an operator both autocratic at home and free-spending abroad, the strategy is clear. As Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said lately: "If sportswashing is going to increase my GDP by way of one per cent then I will continue doing it."

The financial security of the Saudi investment is not in doubt. That cannot be said for all other would-be investors. This explains the concern over Everton and 777.

To describe Everton as vulnerable is an understatement. Here is one of England's greatest old clubs: founders of the original Football League back in 1888, never out of the top two divisions, one of the "Big Five" (along with Arsenal, Liverpool, Manchester United and Tottenham) who helped create the Premier League, winners of nine league championships plus five FA Cups and one European Cup Winners' Cup.

Yet relegation next May could tip Everton to the brink of bankruptcy. The sad colours of the Goodison picture daubed across the last 30 years have only been illuminated by the contrasting successes of neighbours Liverpool. At least, Everton's move into their new home next year will spare supporters the geographical reminder: Bramley-

Protests...Everton supporters have called for Farhad Moshiri to leave

> "We don't want to be a museum. We need to be competitive and we need to win"
>
> Farhad Moshiri on taking control of Everton in 2016

Moore Dock is two miles from Anfield rather than a five-minute walk across Stanley Park.

Optimism last filled the air at Everton back in 1995 when they won the FA Cup, their last trophy. Manager Joe Royle subsequently fell out with the board over transfers and the reigns of old favourite Howard Kendall and Walter Smith brought mostly relegation battles before the arrival of David Moyes. He secured stability, several modest European campaigns and all on a tight budget before heading to Manchester United.

Roberto Martinez made a bright start. More attack, less defence. But his reign was already collapsing in early 2016 when Everton were bought by Farhad Moshiri. The British-Iranian billionaire trumpeted: "We don't want to be a museum. We need to be competitive and we need to win." But nothing changed. Except for the worse.

Moshiri indulged in some doubtful managerial appointments, but perhaps the greatest long-term damage was his financial association with Alisher Usmanov. The Russian-Uzbek oligarch had moved in on Everton after failing to buy Arsenal.

Usmanov's companies signed various sponsorship deals including naming rights for the club's training ground and new stadium. Then, in September 2021, the government barred him from entering the UK. Six months later, he and his businesses were frozen out altogether over his links to Russian president Vladimir Putin. Suddenly the financial foundations had been ripped out from beneath both Moshiri and Everton.

This is a club which, in March, posted financial losses for the fifth consecutive year with cumulative losses over that period totalling a reported £430m. Also in March, Everton were referred to an independent commission by the Premier League over an alleged breach of Financial Fair Play rules.

The club deny any wrongdoing, saying they were "prepared to robustly defend" their position. Meanwhile anger continues to fester at Leicester City and Leeds United in the Championship, who went down last season believing Everton should have been penalised points that would have pushed them into the second tier instead.

Everton's financial troubles were illustrated for all to see in the summer – their only purchases were Portugal striker Beto from Udinese for £26 million and teenage centre-forward Youssef Chermiti from Sporting for £15m – with only Crystal Palace and Premier League new boys Luton Town spending less. Hence the irresistible need to welcome 777 with open arms.

But 777 is not a Glazer or Kroenke or FSG parading a proven sports franchise business model. Instead, 777 was founded only in 2015, long after the current owners of Manchester United, Arsenal and Liverpool had become part of the Premier League furniture. Last year, co-founder Josh Wander told *L'Equipe*: "We have six main areas of operation: insurance, aviation, sport, media, and entertainment. What is important for us is not to build a club which generates profit for the sake of it but clubs capable of living and developing over decades."

The 777 clubs portfolio features great old names such as Italy's Genoa, Brazil's Vasco da Gama, Belgium's Standard Liege, France's Red Star and Germany's Hertha Berlin, along with minority holdings in Spain's Sevilla and Australia's Melbourne Victory. Yet Vasco were hit by a transfer ban in September for late payments to clubs in France, Argentina and Uruguay – not a good reference.

Few clubs can match Red Star for a stake in football history: this is the club founded in 1897 by future FIFA president and World Cup "father" Jules Rimet. Everton are historic too. Yet Moshiri, with no other offers on the table, felt he had no option but to embrace the neoliberal philosophy of TINA: There Is No Alternative.

So who owns the game? Not FIFA president Gianni Infantino, giddily spinning countless political plates; not Aleksander Ceferin, sitting atop UEFA's gold-encrusted Champions League; and not top-level club owners, balancing profit and loss accounts to their own financial advantage.

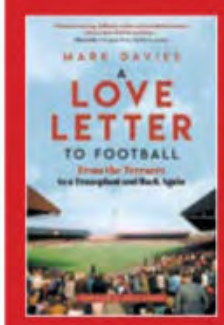
Across all these governance scenarios football's one constant power is its dependably solid mass of fans. Unfortunately, while fan spirit is willing its financial flesh is weak.

777 Partners...Josh Wander, co-founder of Everton's prospective new buyers

BOOKS THIS MONTH

UNITED WITH DAD
By Simon Lloyd
(Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

United With Dad is an emotional tale of football fandom and fatherhood, detailing the agonising final two years of a man's life while drawing on his love for and memories of Manchester United. It is written by David Lloyd's son, Simon, who reflects on his father's life and their relationship, attempting to make sense of why, at such a bleak time, a shared love of a football club should matter so much.



A LOVE LETTER TO FOOTBALL
By Mark Davies
(Pitch Publishing, £12.99)

This is the story of how the beautiful game can help carry us through our darkest days. In 2016, Mark Davies was diagnosed with a rare and incurable blood cancer. A lifelong fan of Middlesbrough, this honest, funny and entertaining account of a life-changing experience and love for a football club underlines that football may not be more important than life and death, but the joy and ecstasy it can bring really can help when times are hard.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Arsenal's goalkeeper gamble

Why adding competition between the sticks is a risk worth taking for Arsenal

Goalkeepers are different. In every other position, there is a sense that competition is a positive. You have a good centre-forward? Bring in another one who might prove to be very good, or whose presence might motivate the incumbent to become even better. But when Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta signed David Raya from Brentford, there was a feeling he had somehow breached one of football's sacred codes.

Part of the problem is that there is no massaging this. There can be no pretence that Raya could play alongside Aaron Ramsdale. One will play and one will not, and that means that if Raya is selected, Ramsdale, who is highly regarded and very popular, must be dropped. Peter Schmeichel has been especially critical: "I don't understand why you want to create a competition situation for goalkeepers," he said. "The one thing you want from your goalkeeper is stability. So goalkeepers are playing a position which is very reactive, there's no proactive action happening, everything you have to do is something you have to do when somebody else is doing something, you have to react to that, you can't be proactive and go out and create a save for yourself. I think it's crazy and I think Arteta might just be creating a problem he didn't need going forward."

A goalkeeper needs to be confident; he cannot live always with the fear that one mistake could cost not merely the game but also his place in the side. No other position is under quite the same scrutiny in quite the same way. And the relationship between a goalkeeper and his back three or four is vital. Defenders have to trust their goalkeeper to organise them, to have a clear sense of when they are likely to come for a cross and when to stay on their line.

Raya's selection for the North London derby suggested he was first-choice but there had been some thought that Ramsdale would play in certain games and Raya in others, which has drawn comparisons with Ron Greenwood's habit of alternating between Peter Shilton and Ray Clemence when he was England manager, essentially because he couldn't decide who was better. But that was essentially an abnegation of responsibility that spread confusion.

Shilton and Clemence were very different goalkeepers: Clemence was used to operating behind a high line at Liverpool and operating outside his box; Shilton preferred to sit deep.

Cameroon's chopping and changing between Joseph-Antoine Bell and Thomas N'Kono a decade later was equally disruptive; Bell believes that the two penalties England were awarded late in the 1990 World Cup quarter-final came about because the defence, having been coached to play with him, pushed up and N'Kono, who became the number one hours before the opening game of that World Cup, tended to sit deep, leaving space that Gary Lineker could exploit.

But the Raya and Ramsdale situation is not like that. Both are similar types of keeper. Both are

Competition for places...David Raya and Aaron Ramsdale

> If the use of Raya over Ramsdale ends up saving Arsenal even two or three goals over the season, it will have been worth it

England rivals... rotating between Ray Clemence and Peter Shilton didn't work for Ron Greenwood

confident with the ball at their feet, as modern keepers have to be. Defences will not have to adjust their depth according to who is behind them. But, well as Ramsdale played last season, there was a flaw. In the first 15 league games of the season, Arsenal did not concede from a crossed set-play. Then, away at Everton, Sean Dyche subjected him to a bombardment of in-swinging corners, one of which brought James Tarkowski's winner. Suddenly there was a realisation that Ramsdale was vulnerable. Arsenal conceded a further four goals from crossed set-plays in the remainder of the season as teams began to target Ramsdale.

It felt significant that it was at Everton that Raya made his Arsenal debut; Arteta wanted to guard against being undone in the same way again. As it turned out, Everton only won one corner so it wasn't a significant factor, but Raya, although two inches shorter than Ramsdale, is a more dominant figure: where Ramsdale cuts out only 5.8 per cent of crosses, Raya claims 8.7 per cent.

There is further statistical evidence that Raya may simply be a better goalkeeper. The most striking number is expected goals conceded from shots on target last season: where Ramsdale registers -3.04 (that is just over three goals more than would be expected), Raya registers +5.86. Looked at in that light, it may simply be that Arteta has upgraded.

Football, of course, is not just a game of statistics. There are other factors to be considered. Ramsdale is well-liked and there are always risks to morale in disrupting the balance of a dressing-room. Every step Raya makes will be analysed, any mistake highlighted. But if the use of Raya over Ramsdale ends up saving Arsenal even two or three goals over the season, it will have been worth it.

Similar ruthlessness to bring in a more productive centre-forward would not elicit the same attention. Goalkeepers are different, but they're maybe not as different as all that.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Penalty disaster ...Mauro Icardi

1 CRUYFF TRIBUTE ACTS

It was in a game for Ajax in 1982 that Johan Cruyff, instead of shooting from the penalty spot, passed the ball to team-mate Jesper Olsen to set up an easy tap-in. Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez recreated the move for Barcelona in 2016, yet Kerem Akturkoglu and Mauro Icardi's effort for Galatasaray left a lot to be desired. After being teed up for an open goal, the Argentine dragged his shot wide, despite the goalkeeper already being on the floor. Bizarrely, the move was recreated – again, unsuccessfully – once more a week later, this time by Mohun Bagan's Australian striker Jason Cummings, who misplaced his pass after telegraphing his penalty-spot run-up to allow the opposition defenders to clear.

2 PITCH-INVADING PUP

Regular readers of RWCMU will be more than familiar with football matches being interrupted by animals. This time we bring you news from the Mexican second tier, where a dog not only made it onto the pitch but also managed to get hold of the ball in its mouth. After evading players and ground staff alike for over a minute, the hound was finally caught and taken from the pitch. "Our new best friend is fine!" announced hosts Alebrijes de Oaxaca after winning the game against Dorados de Sinaloa 4-0.

3 GIROUD HEROICS

With most leagues and competitions now allowing clubs to make as many as five substitutions per match, the days of outfield players going in goal should have become a thing of the past. Yet in October, Milan were forced into shifting centre-forward Olivier Giroud between the sticks after Mike Maignan's red card. You may have already seen the former Arsenal man's brave late save as the *Rossoneri* clung on to a clean sheet in a 1-0 victory; what you may not have seen is the club subsequently adding a goalkeeper jersey with Giroud's name on the back to their online store – which sold out almost instantly – or Serie A officially naming the Frenchman in goal for the league's team of the week. Remarkably, Genoa's keeper Josep Martinez was also sent off, five minutes after Maignan, though they were able to bring a proper keeper off the bench.

4 THE BIGGEST NAME IN FOOTBALL

La Liga has taken the curious decision to offer sponsorship to a club in the fifth tier of Welsh football. The move is part of an initiative launched by the Spanish top flight called Power Of Our Futbol, and will see them team up with Llanfairpwll – or to give them their full name, Clwb Pel Droed Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch – in Division One of the North Wales Coast West League, providing kits bearing La Liga's logo. "This new partnership with La Liga brings further professionalism to our side," said manager Gwyndaf Hughes.

5 MASCOT WARS

There were violent scenes in Ligue 1 once again – but this time between two mascots. In the Rennes corner, a white ermine named Eminig; for Nantes, Riri the Canary. In a move more suitable for the Rugby World Cup, the former tackled his counterpart to the ground so forcefully that the canary not only lost his head but also needed to be stretchered off by paramedics.

Taken out... Riri the Canary

"I have loved every minute of being a dad and...now seems like the right time to give my focus and attention to what is the most important thing in my life – my family"

Former Socceroo Tom Rogic announces his retirement from football to focus on fatherhood

IN

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

32 Moves That Caught Our Eye This Month

OUT

EUROPE

JULIAN NAGELSMANN
The ex-RB Leipzig and Bayern Munich boss was hired by **Germany** following Hansi Flick's sacking.

VINCENZO MONTELLA
After Stefan Kuntz was fired by **Turkey**, Montella took charge of a country he is already familiar with, having led Adana Demirspor until June.

SAVO MILOSEVIC
The ex-Aston Villa striker was appointed **Bosnia & Herzegovina**'s fourth coach of the past year.

FABIO GROSSO
After the sacking of Laurent Blanc, **Lyon** turned to the former Italy left-back, who won Serie A promotion with Frosinone last season.

GENNARO GATTUSO
Grosso was joined in Ligue 1 by fellow 2006 World Cup winner Gattuso, who took charge of **Marseille** following Marcelino's departure.

Marseille hot seat... Gennaro Gattuso

GAIZKA GARITANO
Almeria hired the ex-Eibar boss after sacking Vicente Moreno just four months into his stint.

WAYNE ROONEY
After failing to lead D.C. United to the play-offs, Rooney quit MLS to return to England by taking charge of Championship side **Birmingham City**.

ALVARO PACHECO
Vitoria de Guimaraes are already on to their third coach of the season after the brief tenures of Moreno and Paulo Turra.

LOUIS VAN GAAL
With the club in disarray and sporting director Sven Mislintat fired, **Ajax**'s former legendary manager returned to the club as an advisor.

MICHAEL BEALE
With **Rangers** trailing Celtic by seven points after just seven games, the Gers fired their manager after less than a year in charge.

NICK MONTGOMERY
After winning the A-League title with Central Coast Mariners, Montgomery took charge of Scottish side **Hibernian**. He replaced Lee Johnson, who later joined Fleetwood Town.

A-League winner...Nick Montgomery

DIEGO ALONSO
The ex-Uruguay head coach was appointed as Jose Luis Mendilibar's successor at **Sevilla**.

NEIL WARNOCK
The veteran boss departed Championship side **Huddersfield** after seven months in charge.

EDEN HAZARD
Hailed as one of the best players of his generation, the ex-**Belgium** winger announced his retirement from football at the age of 32.

LOIC REMY
Like his former Chelsea team-mate Hazard, the former **France** striker also hung up his boots.

ANDROS TOWNSEND
The ex-England winger joined **Luton Town** following his release by Everton last summer.

PAPU GOMEZ
The former Atalanta hero returned to Italy after a spell at Sevilla, joining **Monza** on a free transfer.

ALAN DZAGOEV
The former Russia playmaker joined Greek side **Lamia** after being released by Rubin Kazan.

JONJO SHELVEY
After struggling at Nottingham Forest, Shelvey joined Turkish side **Caykur Rizespor** on loan.

CHARLY MUSONDA
After being released by Levante, the one-time Chelsea starlet joined Cypriot side **Anorthosis**.

JOSUHA GUILAVOGUI
The ex-France, Wolfsburg and Atletico Madrid midfielder joined **Mainz** as a free agent.

ROBERTO PEREYRA
The Argentine midfielder returned to **Udinese** two months after exiting the Serie A club.

AXEL TUANZEBE
The Manchester United academy graduate joined Championship outfit **Ipswich Town**.

REGGIE CANNON
The USA right-back also moved to the Championship, joining **QPR** from Boavista.

MAX EBERL
RB Leipzig fired their sporting director for a "failure to commit to the club" after he was strongly linked with a move to Bayern Munich.

SOUTH AMERICA

TITE
Flamengo appointed the former Brazil boss as coach after parting ways with Jorge Sampaoli.

BRUNO LAGE
Despite leading **Botafogo** to the top of the Brazilian league table, the former Wolves manager was fired after a drop in results.

CONCACAF

LEE BOWYER
The former Charlton Athletic boss took charge of the Caribbean island of **Montserrat**.

OUSSAMA IDRISSI
The Morocco winger joined Mexican giants **Pachuca** after spells at Sevilla and Feyenoord.

JULIE ERTZ
A two-time World Cup winner with the USWNT, Ertz announced her retirement aged just 31.

ASIA

JULIAN DRAXLER
The Germany attacker became the latest player to join the Qatari Stars League, joining **Al Ahli**.

SHINJI ONO
A star of **Japan**'s 2002 World Cup, the 44-year-old midfielder ended his 25-year career.

"Much of what Manchester City achieved in the '60s and '70s was down to Francis…he is, quite rightly, seen as one of this club's best-ever players"

Manchester City ambassador and Lee's former team-mate, Mike Summerbee

OBITUARIES

City legend …Francis Lee

Francis LEE (1944-2023)
When lists of Manchester City's greatest players are compiled, Lee's name is rarely far from the top.

City paid £60,000 – a club record fee – in order to sign the striker from Bolton Wanderers in 1967, and it proved money well spent as he helped kick-start the club's most successful period of the 20th century. Supported by Colin Bell and Mike Summerbee, Lee helped City to scale new heights both at home and in Europe. Such was the impact of the trio – City's answer to the "Holy Trinity" of George Best, Bobby Charlton and Denis Law at Old Trafford – that the club recently commissioned a statue commemorating them.

Lee scored 16 goals as City won the First Division title in his first season, lifted the FA Cup a year later and hit the winner in the 1970 European Cup Winners' Cup final, the club's first European title.

He ended his career at Derby County, where he won the 1974-75 league title.

After retiring, Lee became a successful businessman and later Manchester City chairman in the mid-1990s, although his tenure was not a success.

As a player, he possessed a number of records, both wanted and unwanted. He was the joint-top scorer in Manchester derbies until being overtaken by Wayne Rooney, and was City's record goalscorer in European competitions before the current Abu Dhabi era. He was also the first Englishman to be red-carded at a World Cup, against Brazil in 1970.

Funeral…a portrait of Mali great Salif Keita

Remembered…Milan pay their respects to Lodetti on their big screen at the San Siro

Hernan CARRASCO (1923-2023)
Chilean coach who led El Salvador at the 1970 World Cup. Died aged 100.

Dominique COLONNA (1928-2023)
Reims' goalkeeper in the 1959 European Cup final, where they lost 2-0 to Real Madrid. Colonna also won 13 caps for France and later managed Cameroon.

Jim FORREST (1944-2023)
Striker Forrest's return of 57 goals in all competitions in 1964-65 remains one of the most prolific campaigns in the history of British football, and the highest-scoring by any Rangers player.

Maddy CUSACK (1995-2023)
Midfielder Cusack was Sheffield United Women's longest-serving player before she sadly passed away at the age of 27.

Tributes… Sheffield United observe a minute's silence for Cusack

Salif KEITA (1946-2023)
Nicknamed the "Black Panther", the Malian striker was the inaugural winner of the African Footballer of the Year award in 1970 after inspiring French side Saint-Etienne to a league and cup double. That was Keita's third consecutive league title at a club that he scored 143 goals for, a tally that has only been bettered by two players.

Keita caught the eye with his performances in his home country for Real Bamako and Stade Malien, making his international debut at the age of 16. In 1972, he helped Mali reach the final of the Africa Cup of Nations where they lost to Congo.

That summer he joined Marseille, and went on to star for Valencia, Sporting and in the North American Soccer League for New England Tea Men.

Keita's nephews, Seydou Keita (ex-Barcelona) and Mohamed Sissoko (ex-Liverpool) also played for Mali.

Giovanni LODETTI (1942-2023)
A two-time European Cup winner with Milan, the midfielder was part of Italy's Euros-winning squad of 1968.

Sharar HAYDAR (1971-2023)
A defender for the Iraq national team, Haydar fled the country in 1998 and helped shine a light on the reign of Uday Hussein (son of Saddam). In a 1999 interview with *The Sunday Times*, Haydar revealed that players had been imprisoned and tortured after defeats, and that they had to commit large percentages of their salaries to Uday.

After Hussein was overthrown in 2003, Haydar returned to Iraq and became president of Baghdad side Al Karkh where he remained until his death.

Ian HAMILTON (1967-2023)
Former midfielder who played over 500 league games for the likes of Scunthorpe United, West Bromwich Albion and Sheffield United.

Marinho PERES (1947-2023)
After a playing career that saw him represent the likes of Santos, Barcelona and Internacional, along with Brazil at the 1974 World Cup, the centre-back enjoyed a long managerial career that included spells with Belenenses, Vitoria de Guimaraes, Sporting, Botafogo and the El Salvador national team.

Frank McDOUGALL (1958-2023)
After making his name at Clydebank and St Mirren, striker McDougall joined Alex Ferguson's Aberdeen in 1984 and finished as the Dons' top scorer as they won the league title in his first season. The following campaign he scored 20 goals in all competitions as the club won both domestic cups. A persistent back injury forced him into an early retirement a year later, aged only 29.

Ronnie McKINNON (1940-2023)
A Rangers team-mate of Forrest's, the centre-half spent almost his entire career at Ibrox, winning nine trophies in 12 years.

Violeta MITUL (1997-2023)
The Moldova international was tragically killed on a mountain hike with team-mates at her new club, Einherji in Iceland.

Mark PEARSON (1939-2023)
A Manchester United academy graduate, Pearson made his debut at Old Trafford as an 18-year-old in the first match following the Munich air disaster. The inside-forward later played for Sheffield Wednesday and Fulham.

"We've come to an agreement but it's bigger than just the bonuses. For us, it's about being world leaders on and off the pitch"

Lionesses captain Millie Bright confirms that the England Women's players have resolved their dispute with the FA

Serhou GUIRASSY

(Stuttgart)

The likes of Lautaro Martinez, Erling Haaland and Harry Kane all made themselves early frontrunners in the race for the 2023-24 Golden Shoe, but none of them reached ten goals as quickly as Stuttgart's star striker.

With braces against Bochum, Freiburg and Darmstadt, plus a hat-trick v Mainz and a solitary goal at RB Leipzig, Guirassy only needed five matches to hit double figures and move within one goal of his best-ever league haul, which he achieved last season.

Whether the 27-year-old has matured into an elite goalscorer or is simply enjoying an early purple patch remains to be seen, but his national team, Guinea, will be hoping he is still in form when AFCON 2023 begins in January.

QR CORNER

Alvaro Barreal's edge-of-the-box volley for FC Cincinnati v Pittsburgh Riverhounds is our pick for this year's Puskas Award. Watch that, and the other nominees, on FIFA's official YouTube channel.

Use a tablet or smartphone to scan the QR code

Luka VUSKOVIC
(Hajduk Split)
The youngest goalscorer in Hajduk's history, Tottenham Hotspur recently announced that the 16-year-old defender will join them in 2025.

Carlos TEVEZ
(Independiente)
The Reds finished 24th in the first phase of the 2023 campaign, but have been transformed since Tevez arrived in August, going unbeaten in his first seven Copa de la Liga Profesional games in charge.

Owen BECK
(Dundee)
The great-nephew of Wales and Liverpool legend Ian Rush, who is currently on loan in the Scottish Premiership from the Reds, received his first senior Wales call-up in September.

Antonio NUSA
(Club Brugge)
The 18-year-old, reportedly the subject of a deadline-day bid from Chelsea, scored on his Norway debut v Jordan and notched two assists in his second international game against Georgia.

Maximilian BEIER
(Hoffenheim)
After four goals in his first six Bundesliga games this season, the 20-year-old has been tipped as a potential solution to Germany's search for a centre-forward.

Robbie KEANE
(Maccabi Tel Aviv)
Keane went unbeaten in his first 14 games in charge in Israel, winning 11. Guided Maccabi to the top of the table after leading them to a 5-0 away thrashing of rivals Hapoel Tel Aviv.

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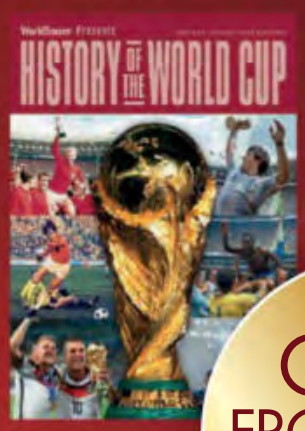

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Fortaleza

The Brazilian side have made huge strides to reach this year's Copa Sudamericana final

Sudamericana finalists...Fortaleza players ahead of their semi-final win over Corinthians

Fearing a repeat of the 2021 Copa Sudamericana final, when Montevideo's Centenario stadium was half full for the meeting of two Brazilian clubs, in September CONMEBOL announced a change of venue for this year's final. Originally scheduled for the Centenario, the October 28 match has been moved a couple of hours down the coast to Maldonado, a ground with a much smaller capacity. After all, both teams and their supporters will have to make an epic journey. Both Liga de Quito (or LDU) of Ecuador and Fortaleza of Brazil are at the other end of the continent.

Fortaleza, though, are no strangers to epic journeys – in two senses. First, as they make their way down from Brazil's North East they have to clock up the air miles for almost all of their away domestic fixtures. And also, this is a club that is going places. The last few years have been a dream for Fortaleza fans, and this continental final is by far the biggest day in the club's history.

Brazilian football sees itself as having a traditional big 12 – the powerhouses from the South East and the South. Cut out of this picture are the big teams from the North East, representing a row of coastal towns. The region is poor and North Eastern clubs have found it hard to compete in financial terms. Historically the biggest is Bahia from Salvador, but despite becoming part of the City Football Group they are once more struggling to avoid relegation.

Fortaleza have been comparative also-rans, with the highlight of their year typically being the battle for local supremacy with traditional rivals Ceara. In the typical way of the South American derby, Ceara are seen to represent the mass of the people, while Fortaleza are seen as an elite club. But with Fortaleza's Castelao stadium packed week after week, no one could doubt the size of the Fortaleza following.

> This continental final is by far the biggest day in the club's history

It is only in the last five years that they have overtaken Ceara in the number of local state titles. But the "Lion", as Fortaleza are known, have their eye on more succulent meals.

"In 2016, if you had said to a fan that within five years Fortaleza would be playing in the Copa Libertadores, they would have called you a lunatic," says club president Marcelo Paz. "Our accomplishments have been unforgettable, and I'm very proud to be part of this trajectory, which has involved a lot of hard work, organisation, discipline, professionalism and the unconditional support of our fans, who have always been present."

In 2017 the club brought to an end a run of eight years in the third division and then won the second division the

following year. In 2020 they made their continental debut, playing the Sudamericana for the first time. In 2021 they finished a remarkable fourth in the top flight and also reached the domestic cup semi-finals. The following year they made their Libertadores debut, and got out of the group phase. All the travelling took its toll, and they seemed doomed to relegation until they pulled themselves to safety with a magnificent spurt, and even gained a place in the qualifying rounds of this year's Libertadores. When they fell to Cerro Porteno of Paraguay in the final qualifying round it always looked like a blessing in disguise; it meant that they went into the Sudamericana – a competition they might have a chance of winning. After a wonderful campaign, with nine wins and just one defeat in 12 games, here they are in the final.

And it has all been done with an eye-and-a-half on the balance sheet. Fortaleza's debt is less than 25 per cent of their annual revenue – very small by Brazilian standards. It means that they can take advantage of recent legislation and turn themselves into a business from a position of strength, with no need for external investors. Should this go ahead, then Paz will switch from president to CEO.

Star man ...Fortaleza coach Juan Pablo Vojvoda

Paz has played a massive role in the rise of his club. So too has former international goalkeeper Rogerio Ceni, who coached the team for almost three years across two spells. The star man, though, is current boss Juan Pablo Vojvoda. Fortaleza spotted his work with Chile's Union La Calera – it is astonishing that this club was even on their radar screen – and appointed him in May of 2021.

Unlike some Argentine coaches in Brazil, Vojvoda made an immediate effort to learn the Portuguese language, and he has stamped his influence all over the team. So impressive has his work been that it is surprising that he has stayed – there have been plenty of offers from more glamorous clubs. But the bond between coach and club is evidently strong.

He has set up his side in different ways, often favouring a back three before the switch this year to a four. The changes are in part a consequence of a high turnover in players. Only a couple of the team pre-date Vojvoda, and the vast majority were brought in this year or last. Whatever the system, there has usually been a desire to impose themselves on the game.

The back four are not the quickest, but the range of passing of Ze Welison and the neat skills of his midfield partner Caio Alexandre give the team a platform. Tomas Pochettino will seek to sneak into the box, linking up with another Argentine, target man Juan Martin Lucero, while cutting in from the left Guilherme can be a handful. The Lion from Brazil's North East is hungry for a title.

Tim Vickery

Key players... Ze Welison and Guilherme celebrate during the semi-final first leg

Victor Boniface

Nigeria forward has made an explosive start to life at Bayer Leverkusen after overcoming early career setbacks

Considering his €100 million transfer to Bayern Munich this summer, few would have expected that, after the first month's action, Harry Kane would not be the standout newcomer to the Bundesliga.

The former Tottenham Hotspur striker by no means underwhelmed, but he was upstaged. Victor Okoh Boniface cost Bayer Leverkusen five times less but, after a remarkable start to life in Germany, he took home not only the season's first Player of the Month award, but also plenty of column inches.

Yet, it could all have gone so differently. Given the lack of a proper developmental infrastructure in Nigeria, there are two main avenues open to the country's young players who dream of a professional football career. The first is to catch the eye of the national team selectors at youth level, where Nigeria's excellent record on the world stage (especially at under-17 level) is likely to provide a showcase. The second is to be affiliated with the few trusted player agencies in the country, most of whom provide a pathway to mainland Europe via Scandinavia.

Boniface's story is a fascinating one: he explored both avenues in turn, only to have debilitating injuries and personal tragedy threaten to steal his dream away.

In the lead-up to Nigeria's campaign at the 2019 Under-20 World Cup, the striker, aged just 18, sustained the first of two injuries to his anterior cruciate ligament. It came at a critical moment, not only denying him a window of opportunity, but also delaying his adaptation, coming just as he first signed for Bodo/Glimt. He recalled: "When I did the scan and the doctor told me I had [an] ACL injury I said to him: 'OK, will I be ready for Sunday's game?' He was like, 'No, no, you're out for like, eight, nine months.' I had no idea what the injury meant."

After his first season in Norway with Bodo/Glimt, which saw them win their first-ever league title, he suffered another, this time on the cusp of a move to Club Brugge. Soon after that second misfortune, he was confronted with tragic news: the passing of his mother, which sent him spiralling.

"I abandoned my diet and began eating everything," he said. "I just wanted to feel something. I started partying, drinking. I don't usually drink, but I was depressed."

Thanks to the support of his close friends and family, Boniface has hit the big time. He did make it to Belgium after all, joining Union Saint-Gilloise in 2022 and earning a move to Leverkusen with 17 goals in all competitions last season. Rising to the challenge of the Bundesliga seamlessly, he is already well on the way to matching that tally for *Die Werkself*.

His first ten appearances in all competitions yielded nine goals, propelling Leverkusen into the title race with Bayern. But, just as importantly, his renewed love for the sport is plain to see in his quirky celebrations and improvisation. "Boniface wants to enjoy the game," Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso told

Spectacular start... Boniface scores from the penalty spot

> "He's not just a classic striker, not just a regular poacher. He's complete"
>
> **Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso on Boniface**

Europa League joint-top scorer...Boniface scored six goals for Union SG in Europe last season

Bild. "But not just for himself. He's not just a classic striker, not just a regular poacher. He's complete."

Boniface's rise sees him join a stellar cast of Nigerian strikers all across Europe, all of whom are in sterling form ahead of next year's Africa Cup of Nations finals in Ivory Coast.

The pick of the lot is Victor Osimhen, the frontrunner for the African Player of the Year award and on the shortlist for both the Ballon d'Or and FIFA's Best. While the Napoli marksman is at the head of the table, the likes of Terem Moffi, Taiwo Awoniyi, Ademola Lookman, Kelechi Iheanacho, Gift Orban, Chuba Akpom and Cyriel Dessers make for outstanding depth. That's even before reckoning with Boniface who, on the basis of his cameo in the early September rout of Sao Tome & Principe, may be able to offer something different.

"To play for the Super Eagles is a dream finally fulfilled because there are too many players good enough to wear the colours of Nigeria but not everyone would get the chance," he told *World Soccer*. "You grow up watching and dreaming, trying to imitate the legends of the game and to eventually live that dream is quite surreal."

Nigeria manager Jose Peseiro has utilised the likes of Iheanacho and Lookman in slightly imaginative roles, and also played a front two in order to fit as much firepower into the line-up as possible. The results have, predictably, been mixed. Nigeria qualified for AFCON at a canter, but have not always convinced against more stringent competition.

Boniface's broad skillset may prove the key, however. The Bayer Leverkusen centre-forward started his career as an attacking midfielder, and has stated his preference for watching skilful number tens as opposed to out-and-out strikers.

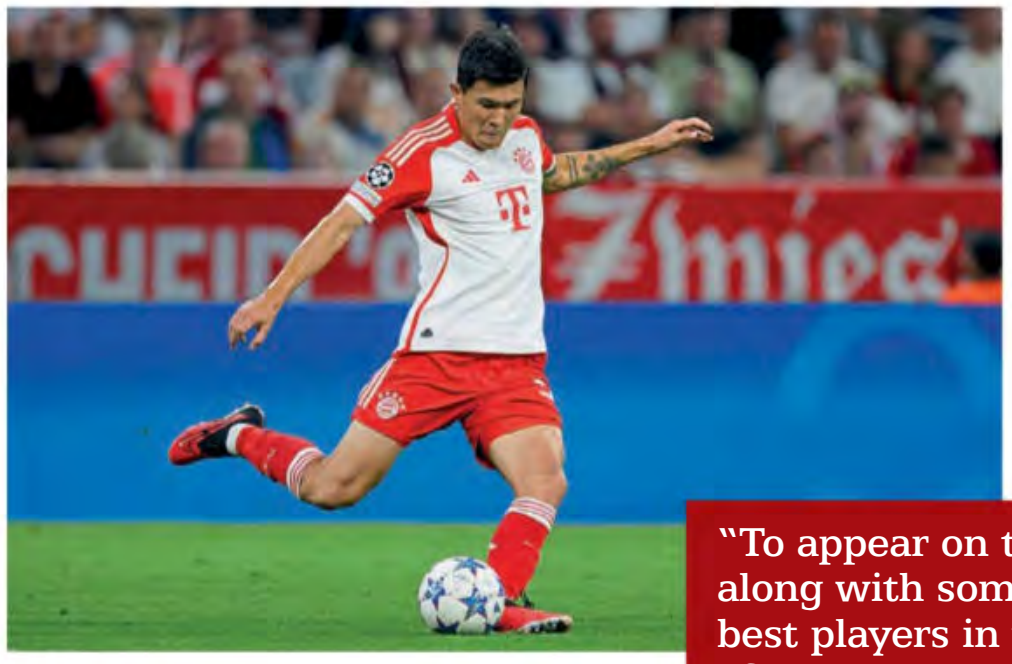
This is evident in his link-up play and proficiency in deeper areas. It is precisely this ability that could see the latecomer break into Nigeria's starting line-up when AFCON kicks off in January.

Oluwashina Okeleji

Kim Min-jae

South Korea centre-back is the first Asian defender to be nominated for the Ballon d'Or

There is much more to come but it has been quite a year for Kim Min-jae. The classy centre-back helped South Korea to a place in the knockout stages of the 2022 World Cup and was a crucial figure as Napoli won a first Italian title since 1990 at a canter. Then-club boss Luciano Spalletti acclaimed the player, nicknamed "Monster" back home, as "the best defender in the world". On the shopping list of most of Europe's biggest clubs, Kim moved to Bayern Munich in July and then, in September, he became the first Asian defender to be nominated for the Ballon d'Or.



Moving up...Kim joined Bayern for €58m in the summer

"To appear on the list along with some of the best players in the world is of course a great honour, especially for a defender," Kim told *World Soccer*. "I know that I still have a long way to go as a player, though. I have a lot to learn and am focused on doing that at Bayern."

After winning two K-League titles with South Korea's most successful team, Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors, Kim moved to China in 2019 for two seasons with Beijing Guoan. Then came a year in Turkey at Fenerbahce before the move to Napoli in 2022 to replace Kalidou Koulibaly and the rest, as well as being named as the Serie A defender of the season, is history.

"I was delighted to go to Italy and play under coach Spalletti," said Kim. "Tactically, I learnt so much from him and he encouraged me to get forward and helped me to read the game more. The fans were also great and gave us fantastic support everywhere we went and I was so happy we gave them something to celebrate."

Strong, quick and intelligent, Kim is hoping that he can win more silverware with Bayern this season and in the years to come. "At Bayern, there is a history of success and I want to help that continue," Kim said. "It is an honour to play for one of the best clubs in the world and I am looking forward to the season and improving myself all the time to become the best defender possible."

There is a chance for international honours in January, when Kim will head off to Qatar for the second time in just over a year to compete in the Asian Cup. South Korea have been drawn with Malaysia, Jordan and Bahrain and will be confident of getting into the knockout stages, but that will not be enough. For a continental powerhouse not to have been Asian champions since 1960 is seen as much too long in Seoul.

> "To appear on the list along with some of the best players in the world is of course a great honour, especially for a defender"
>
> **Kim Min-jae**

"We have a strong team with a lot of good players but there are more and more strong teams in Asia these days. It is going to be difficult but we will go there with the aim of winning."

In some ways he has already won and is redefining the image of the Asian centre-back. "There have not been many Asian defenders to come to Europe and if I can help others who want to go on the journey, that would be great."

John Duerden

Honouring history and tradition...the Lamar Hunt US Open Cup trophy

eyewitness

James Nalton reports

UNITED STATES

The US Open Cup

As Houston Dynamo captain Hector Herrera and his team-mates lifted the 2023 US Open Cup in Fort Lauderdale, local parks and fields across the United States were already playing host to the qualifiers for the next edition.

Just three days after Houston had defeated Inter Miami at Fort Lauderdale, teams with such vivid and original names as Tennessee Tempo, Deportivo Lake Mary, Lansdowne Yonkers, Chicago House, Austin Longhorns and New York Pancyprian Freedoms started out on the road to the 2024 final.

It is at both extremes that a picture of the true character of American soccer be put together. From the grassroots, amateur and semi-pro clubs playing on college fields or in local parks on pitches that often have markings for several other sports; to the glamour of Miami, the world of professional franchises, and a game attended by Lionel Messi, David Beckham and Zinedine Zidane.

Only one end of this soccer spectrum is usually visible. Major League Soccer, with its new Apple TV deal and its Beckham-owned franchise that just signed Messi, is the most well known representation of US soccer. In many cases, it is the only one known or seen, but there is much more to US soccer than MLS.

If there is a starting point for becoming aware of the depth of the sport in the United States each year, it is the US Open Cup. Numerous leagues are represented – from clubs that have been built from the grassroots to franchises that bought a place at the top table of the professional game. They are all there, competing for the same, historic trophy.

The first US Open Cup games were played in 1913 when it was known as the National Challenge Cup, and the first champions were crowned in 1914. The tournament ran non-stop for 106 years, being one of the few that carried on through both World Wars. According to US Soccer, that run – which was halted only by COVID-19 – made the US Open Cup the second-longest continuously running national cup competition in the world after Northern Ireland's Irish Cup.

In the early 20th century, as the game began to grow across the United States, the desire to join FIFA required a nationally recognised governing body. The American Amateur Football Association (formed in 1911) joined the American Football Association (founded in 1884) in applying for FIFA membership in 1912. The AAFA grew in momentum and attracted numerous AFA members before changing its name to the United States Football Association in 1913 – now the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) or, more simply, US Soccer. By 1914 it had become the recognised governing body for soccer in the country, been granted provisional FIFA membership, and created a new cup competition: the National Challenge Cup, which was soon recognised as the most prestigious prize in US soccer. In 1990, its name was changed to the US Open Cup, as we know it today.

From its emergence as part of the formation of a FIFA-recognised governing body to its spread across the entirety of the United States, the US Open Cup has played a key part in the growth of association football in the country, from amateur to professional level.

The cup went fully coast-to-coast in 1954 on the back of commercial air travel becoming more accessible, but the draws at the qualifying stages and early stages remain relatively local so as not to place too much of a burden on clubs in terms of travel costs.

Delve deep enough and long enough into US soccer and

it becomes clear that the US Open Cup, while not the perfect tournament with perfect structure, is all about possibilities for all teams at all levels. This is rare and important in the closed-shop landscape of franchised professional sports competitions in the US.

The Open Cup offers hope, not just for the teams entering it each season, but also for a future blueprint of the game in the United States. There are regular attempts to belittle the tournament by figures at the top of the game, but there are still things to be learned from their criticism.

In a USSF meeting earlier this year, MLS commissioner Don Garber described the Open Cup as "a very poor reflection of what it is that we're trying to do with soccer at the highest level."

Speaking this year to *The Athletic*, executive director of the MLS Players Association, Bob Foose, said of the Open Cup: "My personal opinion is that it's not at the level that our players should be playing at. At this point, the venues aren't there; the facilities aren't there. The structure of the tournament isn't contributing to making MLS a better league, and I think it's something that ought to be pondered."

These are very MLS-centric views of the Open Cup and of US soccer, but player welfare and facilities should be high on the list – to improve rather than exclude – when looking to grow the Open Cup, which in turn means growth and improvement in American soccer.

Investment and improvement in the Open Cup would

Fairy-tale story... Sacramento Republic celebrate reaching the final of the 2022 US Open Cup

2023 champions... Hector Herrera of Houston Dynamo raises the 2023 US Open Cup

naturally be beneficial to the sport's grassroots, something that can't always be said of MLS and its top-down, franchise-based approach.

But MLS franchises, regardless of their attitudes to the tournament, are as important to a national cup competition as those grassroots amateur teams. If it is to be an inclusive, truly open national cup competition, then teams at the highest level are as much a part of this as any other entrant.

The 2023 final may have been between two MLS teams, but that does not diminish the magic of the cup. Not all finals will reflect the fairy tale seen in 2022 when Sacramento Republic of the USL Championship (the USSF's second tier) made it to the final, defeating three MLS teams along the way; or in 1999, when the Rochester Rhinos became the only Open Cup winners from outside MLS since the league was founded in 1996.

The possibility of a lower-division team making the final is a key ethos of the Open Cup, as in any country's national cup competition, but it is not a requirement that they do so every season for the cup to mean something.

In 2023, both MLS finalists had to defeat lower-division opposition as part of their run to the final. Inter Miami only narrowly saw off USL Championship sides Miami FC, Charleston Battery and Birmingham Legion, needing extra-time and penalties to get past their city rivals and only defeating those subsequent opponents by one goal. Similarly, Houston Dynamo only managed a 1-0 win against USL Championship side Tampa Bay Rowdies.

One of the tournament's highlights was the shock progress of the Pittsburgh Riverhounds, who knocked out MLS sides New England Revolution and Columbus Crew on their way to the quarter-finals. The game against Columbus, played at the Riverhounds' Highmark Stadium on the banks of the Monongahela River, was a particular highlight.

The possibility of a lower-division team making the final is a key ethos of the Open Cup, as in any country's national cup competition

The crowd – driven by the Steel Army supporters' group and decked in all white, similar to a Penn State college football whiteout – resembled one for a packed gig or concert rather than a soccer crowd. The setting, the fans and the "cupset" made it one of the soccer moments of 2023, demonstrating that this cup is just as much about the teams who participate along the way as it is about the teams in the final.

Houston themselves might have felt overlooked in the final, as much of the mainstream media focus was on Inter Miami and whether or not Messi would play. Messi had already played a key role in getting Inter Miami to the final, pulling them back from two goals behind against FC Cincinnati in the semi-final with two wonderful assists. Yet there is enough magic to be found in the other 97 teams that entered the cup proper, or the 107 that took part in the qualifying rounds, for the Open Cup to not have to rely on a superstar like Messi.

In the end, the glory belonged to Houston Dynamo, becoming the national champions of US soccer for the second time, having also won the Open Cup in 2018.

It capped a positive run of form for Ben Olsen's side, who showed their superiority in the first half and were rewarded for it with a goal from Griffin Dorsey and a penalty by Amine Bassi.

Inter Miami, despite playing the final on home turf, could not muster a challenge in time to get back into the game. Their goal didn't arrive until the 92nd minute via Josef Martinez, while Messi missed out completely through injury.

Houston's two Open Cup wins put them three behind Bethlehem Steel and Maccabee Los Angeles, who remain the only teams to have won it five times. It is a reminder of both the long history of this cup and the precarious history of American soccer that Bethlehem Steel folded in 1930 and Maccabee Los Angeles in 1982.

The game has a potentially bright future as momentum builds ahead of the 2026 World Cup, a future in which the all-encompassing US Open Cup should help lead the way to greater involvement, accessibility and success from the grassroots up.

Whiteout... Pittsburgh Riverhounds claimed two MLS scalps en route to this year's quarter-finals

eye witness

Samindra Kunti reports

AUSTRALIA

Central Coast Mariners: a community club defying the odds

Tucked away in Tuggerah, a small village 90km north of Sydney that mixes the semi-rural, residential and light industry, the facilities of the Central Coast Mariners are modest at best. The gym is housed in domed tents, the physiotherapist department in a container, and three small tubs serve as ice baths for the players. The clubhouse still needs a lick of paint. During the recent Women's World Cup, Germany used the single pitch at the training complex that met FIFA standards following an upgrade, and finalists England trained at the club's stadium in nearby Gosford.

The club's head of athletic development Andy Bernal, a former Socceroo and Reading player, is almost apologetic over the facilities that can't match those of more resourced outfits in the A-League or European clubs. But sporting director Matt Simon, a former player of the New South Wales club in 2006, remembers the days when there simply ▸

Community club... players and supporters of Central Coast Mariners

wasn't a permanent training ground. He would receive a message from the coach with the location for that day's training session.

Yet today, the Mariners are reigning Australian champions after claiming the title in June for a second time, winning the Grand Final with a 6-1 demolition of Melbourne City, a moment that represented redemption after a decade spent in the wilderness.

Often the Mariners are described as a family club that is punching above its weight. That was perhaps on display more than ever during the 2022-23 season when, with a tiny budget and the youngest squad in the league, they finished runners-up in the regular season with 44 points from 26 matches before eliminating Adelaide United 4-1 on aggregate in the last four to reach the Grand Final against the Melbourne club, which is part of the City Football Group.

Bernal describes it as a "David-v-Goliath" moment, an encounter with "arguably one of the greatest, wealthiest brands in the football business." What followed defied financial, and sometimes sporting, logic with Melbourne City coach Rado Vidosic admitting afterwards that his team had been outplayed and bullied. The club from Central Coast simply destroyed Vidosic's side, who collapsed in the last 30 minutes.

"It was one of the greatest sporting nights in Australian football history," says Bernal. "It was symbolic in a way that it was the most powerful football organisation on the planet against a community club."

Jason Cummings, a prankster with his Joker-inspired tattoos, headlined the Grand Final with a hat-trick. He had been decisive against Adelaide as well, but his goals and the victory recast the narrative around the team – as success so often does. The Mariners were no longer perceived as a club that subsisted on castaways and second-rate players but instead excelled in youth development and through a shrewd transfer policy.

Much of the success has been credited to former manager Nick Montgomery, once a player for Sheffield United and today the head coach of Hibernian in Scotland. "Everybody wrote us off saying that the task was too big and that Melbourne City were too powerful," says Montgomery. "They underestimated us. We were the in-form team in the competition.

"It was a real moment in Australian

Talent factory... Nectarios Triantis and Sammy Silvera both earned summer transfers to the English Championship

A-League champions... Brazilian forward Marco Tulio celebrates with Mariners fans after last season's Grand Final

football to show that you can win with young players developed from your own academy, as well as smart recruitment of players who were coming for the opportunity and not for the salary. It was an eye-opener in Australia."

Leeds-born Montgomery featured for the Mariners in the 2012-13 season when the Central Coast club, then led by current Australia manager Graham Arnold, triumphed in the A-League for the first time, defeating Western Sydney Wanderers 2-0 in the Grand Final. Montgomery formed part of a squad that included future Socceroos Trent Sainsbury and Tom Rogic. He says the club "overspent" at the time and the subsequent fall was deep: they struggled financially, claimed the wooden spoon on four occasions, and got branded the worst professional club in the country.

After quitting playing for the Mariners in 2017, Montgomery revived the club's academy and, alongside assistant Sergio Raimundo – who joined the coaching staff in 2019 – they professionalised the set-up by bringing in sports science and player support, as well as a new game model to develop youngsters with the ultimate goal of making the first team.

"The only way to really compete was to develop our own players," says Montgomery. "We were becoming a club with a pathway to the first team for talented young players, the likes of Alou and Garang Kuol. They came from a small town in Melbourne, a place called Shepparton. They were overlooked by the three A-League teams in Melbourne. We brought them in and very quickly they became A-League players and moved to the Bundesliga and the Premier League. That's a really good indicator of what we achieved."

Sandwiched in between Sydney and Newcastle, Central Coast's catchment area is limited with a population of around 350,000. Those limitations forced the club to build a player pathway through its own youth development, scouting, and savvy signings from the big neighbouring clubs.

"Every club has their own methodology," says Bernal. "The big Sydney and Melbourne teams bring in expensive marquee players or secure the services of former Socceroos returning. It's harder for youngsters aged 17, 18 or 19 to break into one of those sides. We've been very clever in picking up kids from some of the Sydney and Melbourne clubs. We specialise in producing our own players, but grab two or three that have come through the Australian production line and teach them our way."

Simon and Bernal highlight the rise of Nectarios Triantis as an example of the club's success. A defender, he made just a single appearance as a substitute at Western Sydney Wanderers. The Mariners contracted him on a scholarship and realised after two weeks of training that Triantis had talent in abundance. He played a pivotal role in the Mariners' season, featuring 25 times, including in the Grand Final. Five days later, he signed for Sunderland in the English Championship.

Club legends...Jason Cummings and Nick Montgomery during last season's triumph

Others have benefitted from the Mariners' approach as well. Teenage goalkeeper Anthony Pavlesic struggled for game time at the Wanderers before shifting to Gosford where he landed a trial and a move to Bayern Munich.

> "It's all good saying that you want to play young players and cut your budget in half, but it doesn't happen overnight"
>
> **Central Coast Mariners sporting director Matt Simon**

Full-back James McGarry moved from Newcastle Jets to the Mariners; in August, he joined Aberdeen. Sammy Silvera's fine season was rewarded with a transfer to Middlesbrough. Cummings moved on to Kolkata giants Mohun Bagan in India.

National team legends Mile Jedinak and Mathew Ryan also passed through the Mariners. Cummings, Garang Kuol and Danny Vukovic were all selected in Australia's squad for Qatar 2022, the first time ever – along with Melbourne City also at the same tournament – that an A-League club had provided three players at a World Cup for the Socceroos (for a club like the Mariners, this achievement was about more than just prestige: FIFA's Club Benefits Programme paid clubs US$10,950 for every day that one of their players spent with their national team at the finals, including the week leading up to the tournament. Australia's progression to the second round, therefore, provided welcome funds).

Montgomery's focus on development was a catalyst for their individual success. He exists to teach and improve players, no matter the stage of their career, and Bernal agrees: in his view, a coach who can't teach a player to improve his passing or crossing is unfit to serve.

Montgomery entrusted his young players not only with playing time but with the responsibility to take the game to opponents in a tight-knit, industrious unit that played some of the best football in the past A-League season. In 2021, the club also reached the final of the Australia Cup.

The club wants to keep competing for prizes every year and at the same time sell its best players. It's a tough balancing act and business model, with each season representing a new cycle of renewal and reinvention. The flip side of the Mariners' success is that, on the pitch, they will no longer be considered the underdogs and, off the pitch, other clubs may try to copy their philosophy. The new season, then, promises to be more intense than ever with the Mariners carrying the tag of the team to beat, even if Bernal and the now-departed Montgomery claim they will remain the underdogs.

"The biggest thing for us is just to not be complacent and not be happy with what we've done," concludes Simon. "It's about continuing what we've done and building a legacy. There has been a lot of talk of other A-league clubs who want to follow the format of the Mariners. It's all good saying that you want to play young players and cut your budget in half, but it doesn't happen overnight."

Home of the Mariners...the Central Coast Stadium

6 of the best

Stars of the A-League

With the new campaign in Australia just underway, Simon Hill picks out six players who could impress before previewing the season in full on page 80...

1 Tolgay ARSLAN
(MELBOURNE CITY)

Born in Germany to Turkish parents, Arslan comes to Australia on the back of an impressive career built at Hamburg, Besiktas, Fenerbahce and Udinese.

A creative and combative midfielder, he reportedly turned down a four-year contract from the Serie A club to join City. Having featured in 36 Italian top-flight games last season, the 33-year-old has plenty to offer and will help fill the gap created by the departures of Aiden O'Neill, Florin Berenguer and Richard van der Venne.

Announced his arrival by scoring a brace of penalties in the Australia Cup v Oakleigh Cannons, before also netting against Wellington Phoenix and MetroStars, and won't have to worry about settling in to Melbourne – he has three uncles that live in the city.

2 Daniel ARZANI
(MELBOURNE VICTORY)

In 2018, Arzani went to the World Cup on the back of an exhilarating introduction into the A-League with Melbourne City. A move to Manchester City, then a loan to Celtic, followed shortly afterwards, and the world seemed to be his oyster. However, a serious injury curtailed his progress, then, on his return, a further series of loan moves to Utrecht, Aarhus and Lommel failed to rekindle the spark.

Arzani returned Down Under last season with Macarthur but, after winning the Australia Cup, the Bulls axed Dwight Yorke and Arzani found himself on the outer. Now, Tony Popovic has thrown him a lifeline at Victory – it may be the final chance to fulfil his undoubted potential.

Arzani is a tricky winger who has some pace and a bagful of tricks, and Popovic's brand of tough love might be just what he needs.

3 Nestory IRANKUNDA
(ADELAIDE UNITED)

Born in Tanzania to parents who fled the civil war in Burundi, and still just 17, Irankunda's combination of pace, power and finishing have attracted Bayern Munich, who are favourites to sign him once he turns 18.

Until then, Reds fans will continue to enjoy their excitement machine, whose willingness to run at players creates a buzz whenever he comes off the bench (his 35 appearance before this season were all as sub). Following Craig Goodwin's move to Saudi Arabia, his next challenge is to put in a full 90-minute display.

Irankunda was called up by the Socceroos in March, but Graham Arnold opted against handing him his debut, which would have made him Australia's youngest-ever player.

4 Alou KUOL
(CENTRAL COAST MARINERS)

The older brother of Newcastle United's Garang (now on loan at Volendam), Alou returns to the Mariners for a second spell after two years in Germany, where he failed to crack it at Stuttgart. Quick and with a keen eye for goal, Kuol is still only 22 and can easily relaunch his career back in familiar surroundings. He reminded Australians of his ability at the U23 Asian Cup last year, when he scored an outrageous "scorpion kick" goal against Iraq.

Kuol will likely be part of the "Olyroos" squad at the Paris Olympics, should they qualify. Alou's younger brother Teng is also currently in the A-League with Western Sydney Wanderers. The family arrived in Australia as refugees from South Sudan.

5 Marcus ANTONSSON
(WESTERN SYDNEY WANDERERS)

Antonsson has always been a regular goalscorer in his native Sweden. A strong target man with a good touch, he contributed 74 goals in 218 league games for Halmstads, Kalmar, Malmo and Varnamo. But overseas spells at Leeds United (one goal in 16 league games), Blackburn Rovers and Stabaek were less profitable.

Last term, he hit a respectable six in 16 for Al Adalah in Saudi Arabia, as his club was relegated. The early signs at Western Sydney Wanderers, though, are good: two goals in a 6-1 Australia Cup thrashing of Adelaide United suggests his partnership with Brandon Borrello could flourish.

He has a template to follow, too – the only other Swede to play in the A-League, Ola Toivonen, was prolific, scoring 23 goals in 38 matches in a two-year spell.

6 Daniel PENHA
(WESTERN UNITED)

Penha lit up the A-League two seasons ago with Newcastle Jets, when he arrived on a season-long loan from Atletico Mineiro in his native Brazil. At the Jets, he was entrusted with the main playmaker role, and it worked a treat: given licence to roam, he provided four goals and 11 assists.

He was voted into the A-League Team of the Season but, despite interest from other A-League clubs, he opted to go on loan to Daegu in South Korea. After just 11 games and one goal, Penha is back for yet another loan stint – this time with Western United. He could have the same impact as the now-retired Alessandro Diamanti had at the club.

SPECIAL FEATURE

ALL ROADS LEAD TO RIO

The iconic Maracana stadium prepares to host the biggest match in South American club football, as Fluminense face Boca Juniors on home soil

Words: Tim Vickery

Everything, or so it would seem, appears to be set up for Brazilian club Fluminense to win its first-ever Copa Libertadores title.

The Rio outfit have home advantage. They face a Boca Juniors team which drew all six of its knockout-round games and has barely managed half as many goals in the competition. The Argentinians are without captain Marcos Rojo, suspended after being sent off in the second leg of the semi-final against Palmeiras. And, unlike previous rounds, in the final there is extra-time if scores are level after 90 minutes. On a warm spring Rio de Janeiro afternoon this will certainly make it harder for Boca to hang on and hope for the heroics of goalkeeper Sergio Romero in the shootout.

The odds, then, are heavily on a fifth consecutive Brazilian triumph in the South American equivalent of the Champions League.

But if they are true to their tradition, Boca will rise to the occasion and be tough nuts to crack. It is worth remembering that they have only lost one game in the campaign, while Fluminense have lost two. And, with the burden of expectation all on them, Fluminense will also have to cope with big-match nerves. These were on show in the last game of the group phase, when they had to avoid defeat against Peru's Sporting Cristal in order to qualify, and suffered a scare or two on the way to a 1-1 draw.

Also, Boca present Fluminense head coach Fernando Diniz with a dilemma similar to the one he faced in the semi-final against Internacional. The Boca defence struggles against pace – as seen with Rojo's red card against Palmeiras. Another of their centre-backs, the Paraguayan Bruno Valdez, has been sent off twice in the competition this year. The temptation, then, is for Fluminense to unleash quick striker John Kennedy alongside their Argentine sharpshooter, and this season's runaway Libertadores top goalscorer, German Cano.

In the second leg against Internacional it was the introduction of Kennedy that turned the tide in a tie that should have been beyond them. But in the first leg, Kennedy started and was withdrawn at the interval. The team were too light in midfield – an area that Boca will pack. With the midfield anchored by the solid Pol Fernandez and the blossoming though temperamental talent of the left-footed Ezequiel Fernandez, Boca can work their way up the field with little triangles. They will bide their time and seek to slip in the exciting left-winger Valentin Barco, whose link-up play with veteran Uruguay striker Edinson Cavani is crucial to their chances. Fluminense were unable to cope with Inter's Enner Valencia in open space in the semi-final, so will they fare any better against the Cavani-Barco combination?

The Brazilians, though, can pose Boca challenges that they are not used to facing. Colombian Jhon Arias can crash through their lines. He is nominally the right-winger and Keno the left, but one is always likely to cross over so they can operate together. Left-back Marcelo, now back at his hometown club after 15 trophy-laden years at Real Madrid, is liable to pop up on the right wing. Fluminense will create an overload by bringing almost all of their players over to one side of the field, and then going for the big switch, often orchestrated by Paulo Henrique Ganso. In both legs of the last-16 clash against Argentinos Juniors, the vital goal came from right-back Samuel Xavier, advancing as an element of surprise. They will pull the Boca defence around, probing for weaknesses, testing their discipline.

Boca boss Jorge Almiron will be studying the tapes, and searching for a way to interrupt Fluminense's flow. He will take heart from the fact that his team have conceded just five times in the campaign, whereas Fluminense have let in 11, and have not kept a clean sheet in any of their last three games. If his team can hold on then chances will inevitably come their way, as Fluminense are very front-loaded, and can become even more so in the course of the game. When desperate for a goal, Diniz has a habit of taking off veteran centre-back Felipe Melo and dropping midfielder Andre into the back line. It nearly got them into trouble in the last 16 against Argentinos Juniors, when Andre was very lucky not to have a penalty given against him at a moment when the scores were level.

The scene is set, then, for a classic Libertadores final. After three years of all-Brazilian affairs, extra drama is added by having a big Argentine club in the decider. As well as Brazil v Argentina, this one also looks like a case of the front-foot fighter against the counter puncher, and it should be a contest to remember.

THE ROAD TO THE FINAL

BOCA JUNIORS

GROUP STAGE

Monagas 0-0 **Boca Juniors**
Boca Juniors 2-1 Deportivo Pereira
Colo Colo 0-2 **Boca Juniors**
Deportivo Pereira 1-0 **Boca Juniors**
Boca Juniors 1-0 Colo Colo
Boca Juniors 4-0 Monagas

LAST 16

Nacional 0-0 **Boca Juniors**
Boca Juniors 2-2 Nacional
Boca Juniors win 4-2 on penalties

QUARTER-FINALS

Boca Juniors 0-0 Racing
Racing 0-0 **Boca Juniors**
Boca Juniors win 4-1 on penalties

SEMI-FINALS

Boca Juniors 0-0 Palmeiras
Palmeiras 1-1 **Boca Juniors**
Boca Juniors win 4-2 on penalties

FLUMINENSE

GROUP STAGE

Sporting Cristal 1-3 **Fluminense**
Fluminense 1-0 The Strongest
Fluminense 5-1 River Plate
The Strongest 1-0 **Fluminense**
River Plate 2-0 **Fluminense**
Fluminense 1-1 Sporting Cristal

LAST 16

Argentinos Juniors 1-1 **Fluminense**
Fluminense 2-0 Argentinos Juniors

QUARTER-FINALS

Fluminense 2-0 Olimpia
Olimpia 1-3 **Fluminense**

SEMI-FINALS

Fluminense 2-2 Internacional
Internacional 1-2 **Fluminense**

Boca eye Copa number seven

This is no vintage Boca side, but they arrive in Rio with bags of experience and determination – and a real penalty specialist between the posts

In three consecutive shootouts keeper Sergio Romero faced 11 penalties and saved six of them. The 36-year-old, who was a reserve for most of his time in Europe and still a reserve last year when he moved back to Argentina, has done more than anyone else to get Boca Juniors through to the Libertadores final. With two saves each against Nacional of Uruguay, compatriots Racing and Palmeiras of Brazil, he has been the king of the shootout, appearing to fill the goal and making saves to both left and right.

For all his time spent on the bench, Romero is Argentina's most capped goalkeeper, and a return to the Maracana stadium on November 4 will surely bring back some memories. Back in 2014 it was where he came within a few minutes of a penalty shootout, and the chance to be the big hero, in the World Cup final against Germany. In the semi-final he had got them through on penalties against the Netherlands, and had it not been for Mario Gotze's late goal he may have been the hero helping Lionel Messi to a winners' medal eight years before it finally happened.

Romero made his name as part of Argentina's Under-20 World Cup winning team in 2007, the same year that Boca won the last of their six Libertadores titles. They have come close to a seventh: they were beaten finalists in 2012 and again, painfully, to great rivals River Plate in 2018 and four times during this period they fell in the semi-finals.

But not many imagined that 2023 would be their year. True, they won the domestic title at the end of last season, but the football was grimly functional rather than dashing. Would it really be enough to get past the Brazilians, who have established a dominance on the competition and eliminated Boca in each of the three previous years?

Luck of the draw clearly played a part. Boca's group (Monagas of Venezuela, Deportivo Pereira of Colombia and Colo Colo of Chile) was one of the easiest in the field. Then in the knockout rounds Boca managed to avoid Brazilian opposition until the semi-finals, when they played Palmeiras at a good time – without top scorer Dudu, the 2021 champions' goals had dried up – and, after two tight draws, Romero had the chance to perform his heroics in the shootout.

Near the start of the Libertadores campaign there was a change of command, and a change in philosophy. Boca had been coached by recently retired club idols: first Sebastian Battaglia and then Hugo Ibarra. But after the debut game, a 0-0 draw away to Monagas, Ibarra was replaced by Jorge Almiron, a more experienced figure with no previous connection to the club. His best work came with Lanus, who he carried to the Argentine league title in 2016 and the final of the Libertadores the following year. Since then he had done little of note until this Libertadores campaign, which coincides with Boca languishing in the domestic league.

But in the Libertadores, grim functionality has been enough: Boca have scored just 12 goals in 12 games – and it speaks volumes that their top scorer is right-back Luis Advincula.

Edinson Cavani was signed with the expectation of improving things – and the goal he slid in against Palmeiras in the semis could have a considerable psychological impact. The link-up play between the veteran Uruguayan and Valentin Barco, little more than half his age, is key to Boca's chances. The little teenage redhead has exploded this year, running at defences from the left wing. After some injury problems, Boca had a month between the semi-final and the final to get him ready for the full 90 minutes (or maybe 120) at the iconic Maracana.

> In the Libertadores, grim functionality has been enough: Boca have scored just 12 goals in 12 games – and it speaks volumes that their top scorer is right-back Luis Advincula

And if inspiration is lacking on the field, Boca should be able to count on plenty from the stands. Argentina's economic problems make it difficult for fans to travel – there were gaps in the section for away fans at Palmeiras – but this is the big final, and there is time to plan. Many will make the long drive up, just as they did for the World Cup in 2014. Rio de Janeiro will once more have to prepare itself for an Argentine invasion, with beaten up old cars and improvised campsites. From Copacabana beach to the Maracana stadium, those fans will make their presence noted and principally heard.

Shootout specialist
...Sergio Romero

History beckons for Fluminense

One of Brazil's oldest football clubs stands on the verge of an historic night on home soil – led by a master goalscorer thriving in his twilight years

Fluminense began their Copa Libertadores campaign with a 3-1 win away to Sporting Cristal of Peru. The standout moment was the goal that put them in the lead. The local commentator got a bit carried away, yelling that it was a goal of the pure essence of Brazilian football – ignoring an assist from a Colombian for a shot by an Argentine.

There are plenty of homegrown heroes in the Fluminense side – 43-year-old keeper Fabio has kept coming up with big saves, Olympic gold medallist Nino takes responsibility at centre-back, roving left-back Marcelo has been a glamour signing, central midfielder Andre has a huge future, and the enigmatic playmaker Paulo Henrique Ganso has come up with some of the best football of his long and frustrating career – but the most important players are the two foreigners: Colombia's Jhon Arias and Argentina's German Cano.

Arias plays on the wing, from the wing and over on the other wing. His dynamism and mobility are at the heart of the footballing philosophy of coach Fernando Diniz. And then at centre-forward there is Cano, a 35-year-old who is now a star after years of toiling in obscurity.

Cano made little impression in his homeland with Lanus, Chacarita and Colon. But when he went on tour the goals started to flow. Deportivo Pereira in Colombia, Nacional of Paraguay, Independiente Medellin of Colombia (two spells) and then Pachuca and Leon in Mexico. Everywhere he went he got on the scoresheet, without ever winning the plaudits that his scoring record deserved. Cano may well have been a victim of his own efficiency. There is nothing particularly flashy about him, but he makes it look simple, with shrewd positional sense and clinical first-time finishing. After moving to Brazil to join Vasco da Gama of Rio in 2020 and giving them good service he went across town to Fluminense two years later, providing the finishing touch to the team's elaborate build-up play. He has 12 goals in the Libertadores campaign – as many as the entire Boca Juniors side combined. And should he prove decisive on November 4, some are arguing that he will have to be considered the most important player in Fluminense's history.

That would be high praise indeed. Founded in 1902, Fluminense are the daddy of them all. Where many other clubs were rowing associations who took up football later, they were called Fluminense Football Club right from the start. The elegant cricket style pavilion of their Laranjeiras stadium (which they no longer use) is a testament to the Brazilian game's aristocratic origins. And that stadium was the site of many important moments, such as the Copa America of 1919, Brazil's first triumph. Some of the greats have pulled on the shirt, including Gerson (a fanatical supporter), Didi, Rivelino, Carlos Alberto Torres, Paulo Cesar and Thiago Silva. And in more recent times, their Xerem youth training facility has been producing plenty of players, with Brighton's Joao Pedro just one of a long line.

> **Should he prove decisive on November 4, some are arguing that German Cano will have to be considered the most important player in Fluminense's history**

But, unlike most of the big Brazilian clubs (ten of the so-called traditional big 12), they have never won the Copa Libertadores. They came close in 2008 when, under the old, two-legged final system, they staged a rousing comeback against LDU of Ecuador but were beaten in a penalty shootout.

This, then, looks like their best-ever chance. There is an old South American chant about the Libertadores being an obsession. That certainly applies to Fluminense in 2023. And if not now, when? Some players will move on – Andre will surely be on his way in the January transfer window – while others are ageing – Cano turns 36 at the start of next year. The grand final is taking place in their home stadium, where they are usually so strong. Letting this one slip away would go down as another Maracana tragedy.

Back in May they inflicted the heaviest Libertadores defeat in the history of River Plate when they won 5-1. It is true that they have struggled to recapture some of that early season form. They rode their luck a little in their last-16 tie against Argentinos Juniors, and were second best for most of the two semi-final legs against compatriots Internacional. But when they have needed him most, Cano has come good. Of Fluminense's goals in the 4-3 aggregate win over Internacional he scored three – all fine strikes – and laid on the other. The Argentine sharp shooter stands ready to take down Boca Juniors.

Legendary goalscorer... German Cano celebrates overcoming Internacional in the semi-finals

ETIHAD
AIRWAYS
CITY

SPIDERMAN

How Julian Alvarez became Manchester City and Argentina's latest superhero

Words: Joel Richards

"He is almost undroppable," said Pep Guardiola. At a treble-winning club, such high praise is hard to come by. Julian Alvarez had just provided two assists in the Premier League victory over West Ham United in September. "He's learning how to move in the pockets, he's a threat with goals and assists, and his work ethic," said the Manchester City manager.

The departure of Ilkay Gundogan and injury to Kevin De Bruyne led Guardiola to deploy the Argentinian as a second striker, behind Erling Haaland. "He has his chance and he is using it," said Guardiola. Three goals and three assists in his first seven games in the Premier League, plus two goals against Red Star Belgrade and another versus RB Leipzig in the Champions League, show the 23-year-old's form with City has stepped up from last season. In his first year in Manchester, the forward managed 17 goals and five assists in 49 games for the treble winners.

His displays and form early on this season mark the latest chapter in the development of one of world football's brightest young stars. At 23 years of age, Alvarez already has 13 titles to his name – one more than Lionel Messi had won by the same age. He has already won every major trophy in the game, and could add to his tally at December's Club World Cup.

Alvarez is a graduate of River Plate's prestigious youth academy. So too are Enzo Fernandez, Guido Rodriguez, German Pezzella, Exequiel Palacios and the scorer of the World Cup-winning penalty, Gonzalo Montiel. Together, they formed the group of six players in Argentina's squad in Qatar to have emerged from the *Millonarios* youth system.

Yet at the River Plate club museum in Buenos Aires, it is the shirt that Alvarez wore against the Netherlands in the World Cup quarter-final that takes pride of place on display. Alvarez donated the shirt to the institution as it holds special significance to River Plate supporters. Argentina beat the Netherlands on December 9, a date that is etched into the club's legend as the anniversary of their victory over arch-rivals Boca Juniors in the 2018 Copa Libertadores final; a game that defines River's history, that defines the history of the *Superclasico*, and that is also part of the Julian Alvarez story.

By the time Alvarez landed in Buenos Aires to join River Plate's youth system in 2016 he was already sporting the nickname "*Arana*" – spider. "Hardly anyone called my by my real name," Alvarez said upon joining Manchester City many years later. "I've been called that since I was four after playing with my brothers." The Alvarez brothers joked that Julian was using more than two legs to control the ball. This was at a time when he was already catching scouts' attention with his performances at Club Atletico Calchin in Cordoba.

There were trials at Boca Juniors and Argentinos Juniors, and even interest from Real Madrid for whom he scored two goals in a friendly tournament. But the Spanish giants could not sign the

World Cup hero... Alvarez tussles with Netherlands defender Denzel Dumfries

youngster and it was River Plate who offered him a place at the club residence. "Right away we saw he was outstanding," youth team coach Juan Jose Borello told *Ole* on the club's decision to sign the 15-year-old.

Alvarez swiftly climbed up through the youth system and was fast-tracked from the Under-17 side to the reserve side, bypassing the Under-18 and Under-20 teams.

"We immediately saw he had incredible technique," then-reserve team coach Luigi Villalba tells *World Soccer*. "He had good movement, he could pass well, he was strong in one-on-one situations, and found spaces to create goalscoring chances."

River Plate is a club that looks to develop its youth-team players with a specific identity. "At River you can't just win," says Villalba, who also graduated from River's youth system in his playing days. "You have to win, play well and score many goals."

> "Julian is a player that coaches love. He has quality, he is generous and he is mischievous"
>
> **Former River Plate coach Marcelo Gallardo**

This is the famed three Gs philosophy – "*ganar, gustar, golear*", win, love, score – that historically defines River's ethos. It is the school that saw forwards of the quality of Pablo Aimar, Hernan Crespo, Ariel Ortega, Gonzalo Higuain and Radamel Falcao emerge in the last 30 years.

Alvarez joined River's youth academy in a golden era for the club. Under coach Marcelo Gallardo, River Plate were one of the strongest clubs in South America.

The *Millonarios* had been relegated to the second division in 2011 for the first time in the club's history, but won immediate promotion back to the first division. In 2014, Gallardo took over as

Historic night... Alvarez takes on Boca Juniors in the Copa Libertadores final in 2018

coach and an era of unprecedented success followed: the Monumental faithful celebrated the 2014 Copa Sudamericana (the Europa League equivalent), and the following year became South American champions, winning the 2015 Copa Libertadores.

In eight years, River Plate won 14 titles. Gallardo's team played with resolute commitment to an attacking brand of football, but the coach also demonstrated deep trust in the club's youth system. Under Gallardo, 42 players made their professional debuts, including five of that World Cup-winning group (the sixth player, Pezzella, made his River Plate debut in 2011).

Gallardo had followed Alvarez's progress in the reserve team closely and drafted the young forward into the first-team set-up at a critical moment in the club's history.

Two weeks after his league debut, Alvarez was on the bench at the Bombonera. River Plate faced Boca Juniors in the first leg of the 2018 Copa Libertadores final. It was no ordinary final. It was the last year of the competition's long-standing format of a home-and-away tie. But moreover, it was the "final of all finals," the first time the two Buenos Aires giants faced each other on the biggest stage possible. It was the definitive *Superclasico* of all time. "Whoever loses will take 20 years to recover," said then-Argentina president and former Boca Juniors president, Mauricio Macri.

Alvarez was an unused substitute in the 2-2 draw at Boca, but his chance would come in the return leg – when it was eventually played. Boca's team bus was attacked as it approached the Monumental and CONMEBOL suspended the deciding match, taking the unprecedented decision to move the second leg of South America's most important club competition to Real Madrid's stadium, the Santiago Bernabeu.

A tense match entered extra-time at 1-1. When Boca's Wilmar Barrios was sent off, Gallardo deposited his faith in the rookie Alvarez to make the most of the numerical advantage.

Alvarez fired one shot over the bar, before later playing a hand in the build-up on the edge of the box for Juan Fernando Quintero to score brilliantly for River's second. With a late goal, River ran out 3-1 winners to become South American champions and defeat their historic rivals in the process. It was the most important title in River Plate's history. It was also the first title of many for Julian Alvarez.

This was the high tide of the Gallardo era at River. Teenager Alvarez remained down the pecking order of forwards, behind the likes of Lucas Pratto, Ignacio Scocco, Matias Suarez and Rafael Santos Borre. Yet he remained in the first-team set-up, with two starts in the Libertadores the following year when River reached the final once again, where they lost to

River graduates... Alvarez celebrates with former team-mate Enzo Fernandez

Flamengo in a dramatic finale. It would be scant consolation after losing the Libertadores final in the dying seconds, but a month later River won the Copa Argentina final against Central Cordoba. Alvarez was a goalscoring substitute, winning another title with the club.

Into early 2020, Gallardo heaped praise on his young striker: "Julian is a player that coaches love. He has quality, he is generous and he is mischievous." When football in South America resumed after the early months of the pandemic, Alvarez was moving up in River's plans. Gallardo found space in the team for *Arana* on the right side of a front three along with Suarez and Santos Borre. He scored five goals in the 2020 Copa Libertadores, but was restricted to cameos off the bench in the knockout phase, which ended at the semi-final stage against Palmeiras.

2021 would be the year that launched Julian Alvarez. After cementing his place as first choice in the XI, he would become the team's top scorer and the club's new star.

River slipped up in the Libertadores quarter-finals – as Argentine sides began to lose ground on their Brazilian counterparts in the competition – but on the domestic scene Alvarez ran riot, scoring 18 goals in 21 games as River Plate won the league title. His performances saw him crowned South American Footballer of the Year.

In late January 2022, Manchester City announced Alvarez would be joining them on a five-year deal for around £15m. "I firmly believe he is one of the best young strikers in South America," said City's sporting director Txiki Begiristain. The transfer in itself signalled an exception to a recent trend; not since Internazionale signed Lautaro Martinez in 2018 had a major European club moved directly for a player from the Argentine league.

Under the terms of the deal, Alvarez remained at River for six months – time for the striker to score six goals in one Libertadores match against Alianza Lima, becoming only the second player in the competition's history to notch a double hat-trick.

By the time Alvarez swapped the Monumental for the Etihad, he had amply written himself into the club's history books. He left River one goal behind Rafael Santos Borre as top scorer of the Gallardo era with 54 goals, but also as the player with the most assists under the coach, laying on 31 goals for team-mates in a total of 122 games. He had proven himself to be a player for the big occasion, scoring against all of the other sides of Argentina's "Big Five" that includes Boca Juniors, Independiente, Racing Club and San Lorenzo.

"Gallardo makes you a better player and a better person," Alvarez said of his coach. Gallardo acknowledged there

> "I firmly believe he is one of the best young strikers in South America"
>
> **Manchester City sporting director Txiki Begiristain after signing Alvarez**

Alvarez's Honours

COPA LIBERTADORES	RECOPA SUDAMERICANA	COPA ARGENTINA	SUPERCOPA ARGENTINA	COPA AMERICA	ARGENTINE PRIMERA DIVISION	TROFEO DE CAMPEONES
2018	2019	2018-19	2019	2021	2021	2021

would be no player who could replace Alvarez. River's solution would have to be collective, not individual.

While River's supporters lamented his departure, Manchester City unveiled their two new forwards – Alvarez and Norway's Erling Haaland. Alvarez would be faced with the challenge of joining a club that were champions and with the figure of Haaland ahead of him. In the Community Shield against Liverpool, the Argentinian scored what would be City's consolation goal in a 3-1 defeat. But the Norwegian's astonishing 36 league goals and the Citizens' strength in depth kept Alvarez in a secondary role in his first season with the club.

With the Argentina national team, it was a different story.

By the time he joined City, Alvarez was already part of Lionel Scaloni's plans. In 2018, he had been one of the youth-team players that formed the sparring team for Messi and company at the World Cup in Russia. "It would be a dream to play alongside Messi, he has always been my hero," Alvarez said after that experience. Four years later, he would lift the World Cup with his hero.

Alvarez made his full international debut in 2021. "He is one of the options we have," said Scaloni at the time, but the striker would soon become Scaloni's first option.

He was part of the squad that won the Copa America in Brazil in 2021, ending Argentina's three-decade trophy drought. That victory formed the bedrock to Argentina's success in Qatar. As South American champions, Argentina then faced European champions Italy at Wembley in the Finalissima in June 2022, winning 3-0, with Alvarez a late substitute. Belief in Argentina was beginning to grow ahead of the World Cup.

When Argentina travelled to Qatar, Alvarez did so as understudy to Martinez, who started the first two group games alongside Messi. However, during the shock defeat to Saudi Arabia in the opening game and the second group match against Mexico, it was clear Martinez was struggling with a lingering ankle injury.

Scaloni was still finding his team by the third group match against Poland. Youngsters Enzo Fernandez and Alexis Mac Allister were drafted into midfield while Alvarez joined Messi in attack. He promptly scored and cemented his place in the starting XI, following up with another goal against Australia in the last 16, and two more against Croatia in the semi-final, including the epic charging run that evoked Mario Kempes' goal in the 1978 World Cup. In the final, it was his deep pass for Mac Allister that set in motion the sweeping counter-attack for Argentina's second goal.

World Cup dream ...Messi celebrates Alvarez's goal against Australia in the last 16

Deadly duo...Erling Haaland and Alvarez celebrate winning the UEFA Super Cup

From the World Cup with Argentina and the treble with Manchester City, to having been champion of Argentina and champion of South America, he has won every major title in the game. And with club and country, Julian Alvarez has proven himself to be more than just the understudy.

FINALISSIMA	WORLD CUP	PREMIER LEAGUE	FA CUP	CHAMPIONS LEAGUE	UEFA SUPER CUP
2022	2022	2022-23	2022-23	2022-23	2023

BRAG
moosh.pt
Desporto & Casino
SONY

THREE BECOME FOUR?

Why Braga are preparing to join Porto, Benfica and Sporting as one of Portugal's premier clubs

Words: Tom Kundert

Since the origins of football in Portugal a century ago, the country's football landscape has been dominated by the *Tres Grandes* (Big Three) of Benfica, Sporting and Porto. But that could be about to change, as an increasingly strong case can be made to include Braga in such exalted company given the club's sustained growth over the past 20 years.

On August 29, Braga beat Panathinaikos in Athens to book their place in the Champions League group stage. Less than a week later, back at their home in the beautiful Minho region of northern Portugal, the club had another day of celebration as the second phase of their "Sports City" was inaugurated amid much pomp and circumstance.

The ceremony to mark the opening of the multi-million-euro complex that includes a hotel, ten football pitches, a multi-sports pavilion, a new club shop, meeting rooms and other facilities was attended by government ministers, local dignitaries, the heads of the Portuguese Football Federation and the Portuguese league, and high-profile foreign guests.

"Portugal is a football country and it's remarkable what Braga has done for football," said Paris Saint-Germain president Nasser Al Khelaifi in his capacity as president of the European Club Association (ECA) and also as chairman of Qatar Sports Investment, which has a 29.6 per cent share in the Portuguese club. "Braga president Antonio Salvador is doing an incredible job."

UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin sent a video message stating: "Braga is an admirable club and an example in the pyramid of football development. It has outgrown its roots to became a club of a truly European dimension."

What makes the Braga story so compelling is the fact its evolution has been achieved organically, thanks to decades of sound decision-making. This is not a story of a bankrolled club buying its way up the football food chain.

"This is an enormous demonstration of a club that is not content at what it has achieved, that does not believe in the impossible, and that does not relinquish its independence, autonomy and growth," said Salvador in his speech on Cidade Desportiva do Sporting Clube de Braga inauguration day, adding that the club will have fully paid off the investment by 2025.

Elected president in 2003, Salvador has been the driving force behind the club's unremitting growth. Twenty years ago, no one could have imagined the impact the Braga-born businessman would have. Although a mainstay in Portugal's top flight, Braga's best finish before Salvador took over was fourth place, which had been achieved five times in its entire history.

Under the new president, Braga have finished fourth 11 times, third three times and runners-up once. During his watch, the *Arsenalistas* have also won the Portuguese Cup twice and the League Cup twice, but not only domestically have new heights been scaled. In Europe, Braga won the Intertoto Cup, were runners-up in the Europa League and have participated

Club icon... Ricardo Horta

Instrumental...club president Antonio Salvador lifts the Portuguese Cup after Braga beat Porto in the 2016 final

admirably in the Champions League three times. It represents astonishing progress for a club whose previous moment of glory was a single Portuguese Cup triumph in 1966.

So how has Salvador brought about such a turnaround? Firstly, his intrinsic belief that one day he can lead his hometown club to the top of the tree in Portugal has fuelled an infectious level of ambition.

"The dream is to be Portuguese champions," said veteran Portugal centre-back Jose Fonte upon signing in the summer. "We all know it's a tough ask, but I'm not afraid to say it." Any new recruit making such a statement two decades ago would have been laughed out of town. Nowadays it is far from an outlandish goal.

The signing of fellow Euro 2016 champion Joao Moutinho, after he had looked all set to return to Porto, is another example of experienced players who have trodden the biggest stages in world football happy to commit to Braga. Moutinho managed the notable feat of slyly having a dig at Porto while heaping praise on his new club. "Here, we can believe in what people say," said the midfielder. "Braga have shown over the years what a great club it is and have evolved both on the national and international front and shown they can compete with any other team."

Secondly, an intelligent multipronged recruitment policy has been key to Braga's rise. Picking up veterans who still have plenty to offer has been just one arm of a multifaceted recruitment policy, whereby the success on the pitch has manoeuvred the club into an alluring niche all of its own.

Portugal's traditional Big Three hoover up all the best teenage talent in the country, but inevitably many of them do not make it. There are only so many squad places available and the management of these clubs, always weary of appeasing demanding fanbases craving big-name signings, often lose patience with local talent in favour of more expensive alternatives from foreign shores. Braga have positioned themselves as the perfect landing place for players who have shown excellence but may not yet have convinced Porto, Benfica or Sporting's scouting departments they are up to the job.

> "Braga has outgrown its roots to became a club of a truly European dimension"
>
> **UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin**

And, to a talented youngster, Braga offers an enticing proposition to pursue their careers. There is a greater likelihood of playing time while still turning out for one of Portugal's best teams with the shop window of European football guaranteed. Bristling with desire to show their former employers they were wrong to let them go, there are plentiful examples of such players going on to enjoy stellar careers for the northerners, the foremost example being club captain, record goalscorer and current Portugal international Ricardo Horta. The brilliant forward was jettisoned by Benfica at a young age, along with his brother Andre, but both are now thriving at the Quarry. In the summer of 2022, Benfica tried desperately to buy back Horta, but Braga priced them out of snatching their prized asset.

More recently, the club have started to exploit the foreign market with an uncanny knack of bringing in the right profile of player. Brazilian goalkeeper Matheus Magalhaes, Libyan midfielder Al Musrati, Mali centre-back Sikou Niakate, and Spaniards Abel Ruiz, Victor Gomez and Alavaro Djalo are examples of foreign talent that have found a happy home at Braga.

The final piece in the jigsaw of Braga's low-cost, high-performance squad building model is the youth academy. Salvador has recognised that to truly compete with Portugal's big guns, Braga will have to be proficient at producing their own talent, which is precisely why the inauguration of the new improved facilities was celebrated with such fanfare. The Braga academy

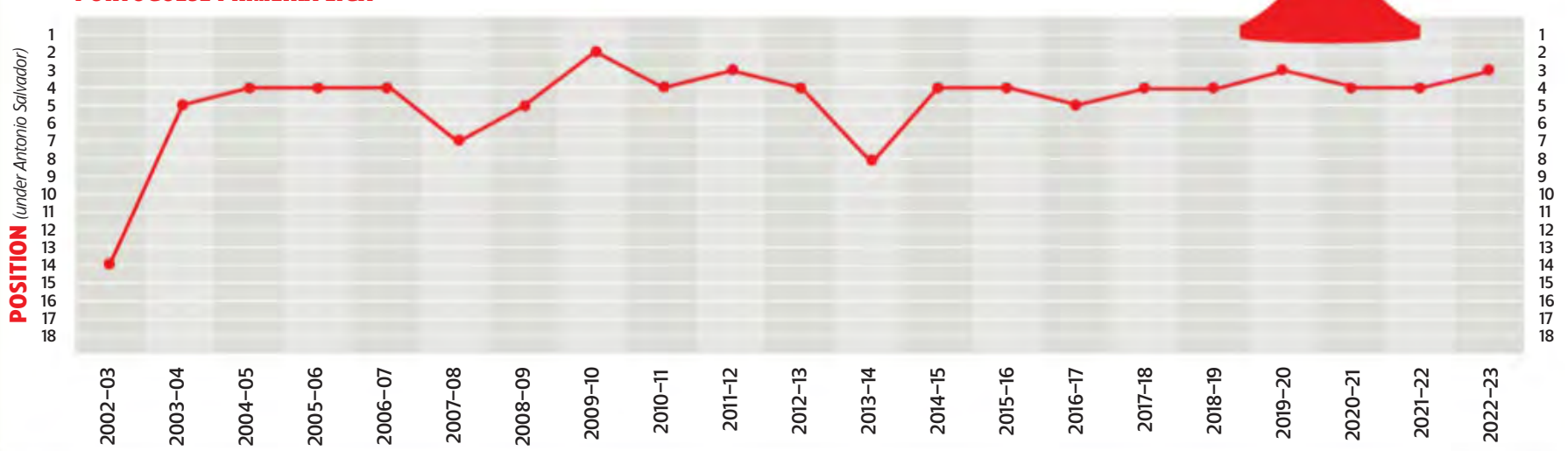
SPORTING CLUBE DE BRAGA *1921-2023*

HONOURS

Portuguese Second Division	Portuguese Cup	Portuguese League Cup	UEFA Intertoto Cup	Portuguese League	Europa League
1946-47, 1963-64	*1965-66, 2015-16, 2020-21*	*2012-13, 2019-20*	*2008*	*Runners-up 2009-10*	*Runners-up 2010-11*

Trophies 8

PORTUGUESE PRIMEIRA LIGA



has already spawned notable success stories such as Pedro Neto, Francisco Trincao and Vitinha, all of whom earned the club huge transfer fees when sold to Lazio, Barcelona and Marseille respectively.

A third and equally important aspect behind the success of Braga's football operation over the past two decades is linked to Salvador's astute – and frequent – managerial appointments. In two decades at the helm, Salvador has appointed a total of 20 first-team coaches. The president demands his level of ambition be matched by on-field performances and is not afraid to pull the trigger when results are deemed unacceptable. However, the high turnover in the dugout is explained as much by outstanding accomplishment as failure.

Salvador has been especially adept at identifying young coaching talent. He is not averse to risk-taking and giving unproven managers a chance. And, as mentioned above in relation to high-ceiling young players, the club is an enticing prospect for a fledgling coach looking to climb the managerial ladder.

Hence, Braga has become a veritable breeding ground for gifted young Portuguese coaches. Leonardo Jardim, Sergio Conceicao, Paulo Fonseca, Abel Ferreira and Ruben Amorim have all gone on to enjoy glittering careers after learning the ropes at Braga and making important contributions to the club's upward trajectory.

Braga's emergence as a club able to compete with the traditional powerhouses has been one of the most positive developments in the recent history of Portuguese football. The remarkable growth of the club shows no sign of stopping any time soon. Sound investment, excellence in both recruitment and the running of the club in all areas, and the undiminished desire of the mentor behind the project augur well for continued progression. Watch this space.

Champions League...Braga players celebrate beating Union Berlin in this season's group stage

Cup winners... Braga celebrate winning the 2021 Portuguese Cup

THE COACH

ARTUR JORGE
Age 51 (01.01.72)
An authentic one-club man, Jorge spent his entire 12-year playing career at Braga as a rugged and dependable centre-back, clocking up over 250 appearances for his hometown football team.

Jorge then moved into coaching, working his way through Braga's youth structure – and briefly as interim head coach in 2020 – before being appointed manager of the senior team ahead of the 2022-23 season.

He promptly set club records in terms of points (78), wins (25) and goals (75), subsequently navigating the team through Champions League qualifying to make the group stage of Europe's premier club competition for the first time in 11 years.

THE KIT

Worldwide fans watching Braga for the first time may be somewhat surprised to see a striking similarity with a famous English club.

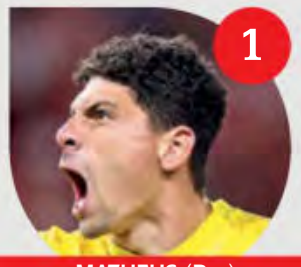
The origin of the identical design to Arsenal's traditional red top and white-sleeved kit is disputed. Some claim it dates back to when the first team was coached by Hungarian manager Jozsef Szabo in the 1930s, a confessed admirer of the North London club, while a competing version states that it was "fanatical Arsenal supporter" and former president Jose Antunes Guimaraes who was responsible for adopting the kit.

Whatever the truth, the association with the English club stuck, and from the mid-1940s onwards the team has been commonly referred to by its nickname of *Os Arsenalistas*.

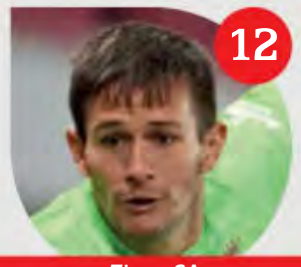
THE SQUAD

(Ages as of 27.10.23)

GOALKEEPERS



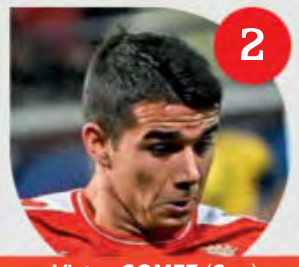
MATHEUS (Bra)
Age 31 (29.03.92)
The tall and stocky keeper joined from America Mineiro in 2014 and took his time to win the No.1 spot, but has been in magnificent form ever since doing so.



Tiago SA
Age 28 (11.01.95)
A dependable back-up, Sa has spent his entire career at Braga but playing time has been limited given the form of Matheus. A former U18, U19 and U20 Portugal international.

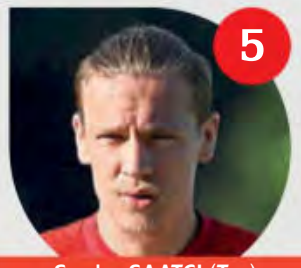
Lukas HORNICEK (Cze)
Age 21 (13.07.02)
The Czech Republic U21 international keeper stands extremely tall at 6ft 6ins, and joined Braga from Czech minnows Pardubice in 2019 initially on loan.

DEFENDERS

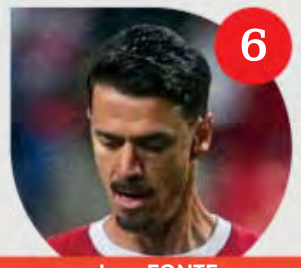


Victor GOMEZ (Spa)
Age 23 (01.04.00)
Considered by many as the best right-back in Portugal last term. Braga turned the ex-Spain U21 international's loan deal into a permanent transfer in the summer.

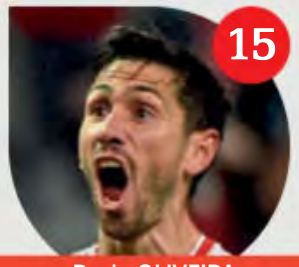
Sikou NIAKATE (Mli)
Age 24 (10.07.99)
Scouted from the French lower leagues, Niakate has been a revelation. After a season on loan, the powerful defender signed permanently in the summer for less than €2m.



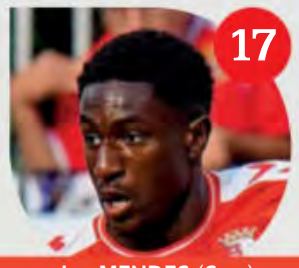
Serdar SAATCI (Tur)
Age 20 (14.02.03)
Highly promising young Turk plucked from the Besiktas youth ranks a year ago. Superb in Braga's crucial Champions League qualifying victory away to Panathinaikos.



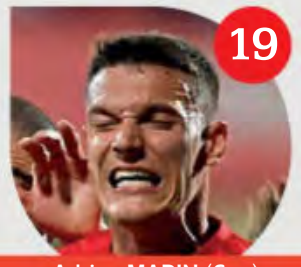
Jose FONTE
Age 39 (22.12.83)
A classic late bloomer, Fonte rose to the fore in his 30s – as Southampton captain – but was in time to build a brilliant career, winning the Euros in 2016 with Portugal along the way.



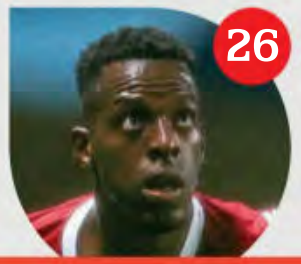
Paulo OLIVEIRA
Age 31 (08.01.92)
Former Sporting and Eibar centre-back Oliveira has been a solid performer since signing for Braga in 2021. Began his senior career at bitter local rivals Vitoria de Guimaraes.



Joe MENDES (Swe)
Age 20 (31.12.02)
Signed from Swedish side AIK at the end of January this year, just two weeks after making his international debut. The right-back is very much the understudy to Victor Gomez.



Adrian MARIN (Spa)
Age 26 (09.01.97)
Robust and skilful left-back who has played in Portugal for the past three campaigns (previously with Gil Vicente and Famalicao). Another of Braga's Spanish legion of players.



Cristian BORJA (Col)
Age 30 (18.02.93)
Experienced Colombian who can play at left-back or centre-back. Borja won a league medal at Sporting in 2020-21 thanks to his appearances for the Lisbon club before joining Braga in 2021.

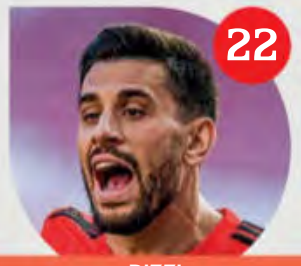
MIDFIELDERS

AL MUSRATI (Lby)
Age 27 (06.04.96)
So often the heartbeat of Braga, the Libyan midfielder is robust, positionally intelligent, unflappable in temperament and an absolutely outstanding passer of the ball.

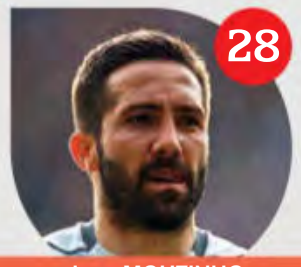
Andre HORTA
Age 26 (07.11.96)
The former Benfica youth player is somewhat overshadowed by his older brother but, as a skilful and creative operator, he is a fine footballer in his own right.

Rodrigo ZALAZAR (Uru)
Age 24 (12.08.99)
Spanish born but a full Uruguay international who has played most of his career in Germany. Braga broke with tradition by paying a significant fee for the tall midfielder in July.

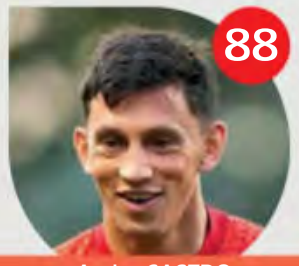
VITOR CARVALHO (Bra)
Age 26 (27.05.97)
Signed from Gil Vicente in the summer, the robust Brazilian midfielder – who came through Coritiba's academy – has exceeded expectations as one of Braga's best performers in 2023-24.



PIZZI
Age 34 (06.10.89)
One of the consistently best footballers in Portugal over the last decade and a multiple-trophy winner at Benfica, Pizzi returned to his former club last season.

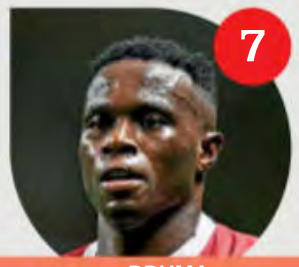


Joao MOUTINHO
Age 37 (08.09.86)
A brilliantly efficient midfielder with a glittering career behind him having played for Wolves, Monaco, Porto and Sporting. Only Cristiano Ronaldo has won more caps for Portugal.

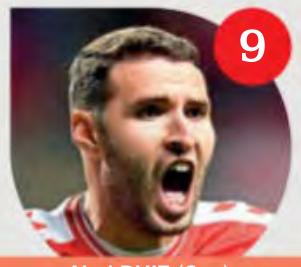


Andre CASTRO
Age 35 (02.04.88)
Another experienced campaigner, the Porto youth academy product spent most of his career in Turkey (Kasimpasa and Goztepe) before returning to the north of Portugal in 2020.

FORWARDS

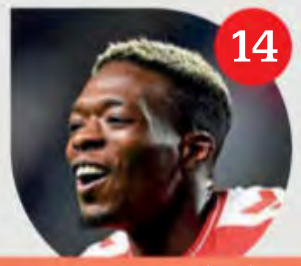


BRUMA
Age 29 (24.10.94)
Extravagantly talented winger whose ability has never been fully harnessed in a journeyman career. Seems to be finding consistency at the Quarry.

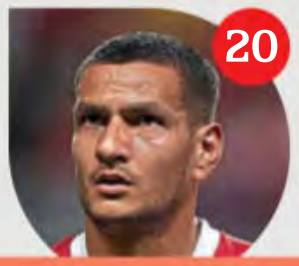


Abel RUIZ (Spa)
Age 23 (28.01.00)
A product of Barcelona's famous *La Masia* youth set-up, the hard-working and intelligent Ruiz has improved year on year since joining Braga in 2020. An U19 European champion with Spain in 2019.

ROGER Fernandes (Gnb)
Age 17 (21.11.05)
A precocious talent, Roger became the youngest player to score for Braga's first team when netting in the Portuguese Cup against Moitense in 2021 at the age of just 15.



Alvaro DJALO (Spa)
Age 24 (16.08.99)
The new jewel in Braga's crown, winger Djalo began his career in Spain and trained as a carpenter as a back-up plan. He's scored some crucial and spectacular goals at the start of 2023-24.



RONY LOPES
Age 27 (28.12.95)
The talented Brazilian-born attacker moved from Benfica's academy to Manchester City at a young age. Has since bounced around France, Spain and Greece in a career blighted by injury.

Ricardo HORTA
Age 29 (15.09.94)
Captain and the club's record goalscorer, Horta has provided several magnificent seasons of service for Braga. Was part of Portugal's 2022 World Cup squad, scoring against South Korea.

Simon BANZA (Fra)
Age 27 (13.08.96)
French striker snapped up from Lens in 2022 after a prolific season on loan at local rivals Famalicao. Tends to rotate with Abel Ruiz for the lone striker role in Artur Jorge's 4-2-3-1 system.

THE STADIUM

A stadium like no other

Braga's stunning rise this century is symbolised by its breathtaking home. The Braga Municipal Stadium may have a mundane name, but there is nothing ordinary about the venue, chiselled into the former Monte do Castro Quarry.

Two symmetrical stands straddle either side of the pitch, connected by dozens of steel strings forming a canopy-style roof, while neither end houses any spectators. Explaining the concept behind the unusual option, architect Eduardo Souto de Moura said: "A stadium is a theatre, where 22 actors play from one side to the other and that is how the spectacle should be watched." One of the goals has a striking backdrop carved from the sheer rock face, while the other provides an open view of the valley tumbling down to the city of Braga.

Built 20 years ago as one of the host stadiums for the 2004 European Championship where it hosted two matches, including Bulgaria v Denmark (pictured), the dazzling aesthetics and mastery of the construction earned Souto de Moura the Pritzker Prize – considered the Nobel Prize for architecture – in 2011.

Facetoface

ANTONIO SALVADOR
(Club president)

"The challenge is to never stop aiming for more"

How have Braga risen so much in Portuguese and European football in the last 20 years?
For a full answer, I would have to give a very long response, but to sum up I'd say we've had three major cycles during this period. The first job was to recover and stabilise the club, both in football terms and financially, at the same time making it more autonomous. Sporting Clube de Braga was a club dominated by political and business interests and this had to stop to fulfil our vision.

Fortunately, we achieved this goal quickly, and in the second cycle we targeted growth and international consolidation. We duly accomplished this objective, which allowed us to increase the value of our assets and establish Braga as a club that fosters and develops elite-level players and coaches. This enabled us to qualify for UEFA competitions practically every year, get to a Europa League final, reach the Champions League and fight for domestic silverware.

Once that cycle was consolidated, which brought positive results both on the pitch and off it in financial terms, the focus shifted to enhancing the facilities, because historically Braga had never possessed its own infrastructures, but today it has a Sports City that is a benchmark and is unique in the national and European panorama. There are not many examples of sports complexes integrated into the city like ours.

When you became club president in 2003, did you ever imagine that Braga could achieve what it has achieved in such a short space of time?
The outcome is the consequence of our work. Of course, we have to map out a vision to make it happen, and I strive to instil a mindset whereby everybody who works at Braga can look beyond our reality at each moment in time. If we are in the Europa League, we want to reach the Champions League. If we win a trophy, we want to win another one. That's our mentality. I'm not shy about saying we look to

"Our greatest victory"...Braga's Sports City complex *Credit: Instagram @sportingclubedebraga*

"Made in Sports City"...former Braga forward Vitinha joined Marseille in January

the best and clearly have the ambition of battling against them and overcoming them.

If you had to choose the most memorable moment of your mandate to this point, what would it be?
That's very tough. All our trophies were important. Every time we qualified for Europe it was important. But I would say the implementation of the Sports City is our greatest victory and is a massive contribution to making Braga strong today, and ensuring the Braga of the future will be even stronger.

Is it possible to break the traditional paradigm of Portugal's Big Three? Should we now be talking about the Big Four?
I understand why this is discussed in the media but it's not an issue that really bothers me. What I want is for Braga to never tire of improving and growing, and that everybody at the club has the ambition to become bigger and better.

What role does the state-of-the-art Sporting Clube de Braga Sports City play in the future of the club?
It's essential. Look, last season we sold David Carmo to Porto and Vitinha (Vitor Oliveira) to Marseille. These are two "made in Sports City" players. It would be impossible to produce footballers of this quality, sold for these transfer fees, if we didn't have this complex. Of course, the club is much more than this, but I'd say that today and in the future the club and the Sports City can almost be considered as one. It is the basis of everything.

What is the nature of the partnership with Qatar Sports Investment?
QSI is a large shareholder, which is a position it has acquired through the purchase of a holding from another shareholder. Of course, it's a shareholder with enormous capacity, especially regarding its knowhow and its network. We have been building a very good relationship, especially because we think in the same way: we focus on a future vision which allows us to continue to grow and which guarantees the autonomy and independence of Braga.

What are the immediate and long-term objectives of Braga?
The challenge is to never stop aiming for more. Of course, we want our professional football team to win more trophies for the club, but we also want to fulfil our role as an eclectic club that nurtures young sportsmen and sportswomen. Today our facilities allow thousands of youngsters and children of both sexes to practise 14 different sports. We want to attract more and more members and supporters because people are the key to everything and everything we do at Braga is for the benefit of the people.

You have been critical of Portuguese football, namely its lack of competitiveness and low attendances, and have suggested ideas to improve these and other aspects. Are you hopeful that football in Portugal is improving and is on the right path?
Unfortunately, Portugal has dropped one position in the UEFA ranking and this has had a harmful effect for everyone. I'm very sorry to say that the diagnosis we drew up one-and-a-half years ago is still the same, and in our opinion the problems are holding back the growth of Portuguese football as a whole and preventing us from reaching our full potential. I believe in Portuguese football, but to be more competitive we have to hold difficult discussions and make tough decisions. I don't feel there is a willingness to do that.

> "Braga had never possessed its own infrastructures, but today it has a Sports City that is a benchmark and is unique in the national and European panorama"

Interview by Tom Kundert

TOMORROW'S STARS TODAY

Talentscout

BREAKOUT STARS

Words Nick Bidwell

Lamine YAMAL

Barcelona

In a sentence
A 16-year-old winger in his maiden full season in the Barcelona first-team squad, already good enough to feature regularly in the star-studded *Blaugrana* ranks and to score on his senior debut for Spain in September.

What they say
"He had a very particular running style, he was a little wild. But you could see the real talent there"
Barcelona youth development director Aureli Altimira

"I'm not picking him on a whim. I'm doing so because he's capable of making a difference. Arriving at the right decisions is the most difficult thing for a player and Lamine always makes the correct choices"
Barcelona head coach Xavi

The story so far
Lamine Yamal Nasraoui Ebana, born and raised a stone's throw from the Camp Nou by a Moroccan father and mother from Equatorial Guinea, has been busy rewriting the history books these past few months, becoming the youngest-ever Barca first-teamer last April – just 15 on entering the fray as a substitute in a La Liga victory over Real Betis – and breaking more records for precociousness this term. He is now Barca's rawest La Liga starter of all time (16 years and 38 days), the youngest player to set up a goal in the Spanish top flight (16 years and 45 days) and the second-youngest Champions League debutant (16 years and 68 days) after taking full advantage of favourable circumstances – including the summer sale of Ousmane Dembele to Paris Saint-Germain and Raphinha's recent red-card suspension.

In his recent senior international debut, he marked the occasion with a well-taken goal in a 7-1 thrashing of Georgia. At 16 years and 57 days, he is both Spain's youngest-ever player and goalscorer.

Yet another diamond to emerge from Barca's prolific *La Masia* academy, he was signed from Catalan club La Torreta at the age of seven, sealing the deal with a hat-trick on trial day.

The next step
At the start of October, the boy wonder put pen to paper on a new contract with Barcelona, a deal which ties him to the *Blaugrana* until 2026 and includes a mammoth €1 billion release clause – a figure which puts him on par with nine other Barca players with a buyout clause of that magnitude. The club are in for the long-haul with him. When he turns 18, a vastly-improved five-year contract awaits.

Strengths
Comfortable in any position across the forward line, his number one asset is his extraterrestrial dribbling ability, the gift of eliminating defenders at will, of finding an escape route in the most densely populated areas on the field. Very creative out wide, especially on the right side, where he uses his wonderful left foot to great effect. He also boasts a rare football IQ and a sound attitude.

Weaknesses
Unsurprisingly for someone of his tender years, Yamal has yet to reach peak muscle mass and can sometimes be brushed off the ball in shoulder-to-shoulder combat.

3 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT YAMAL

- He is represented by superagent Jorge Mendes – proof, if it were needed, that the young man is certainly going places.
- One of his favourite players is fellow Spanish international forward Marcos Asensio, who recently quit Real Madrid for Paris Saint-Germain.
- Yamal came very close to joining Barca's cross-town rivals, Espanyol. Two days before his successful trial with the *Blaugrana*, he was offered a spot in Espanyol's youth team.

"Lamine always makes the correct choices"
Barcelona head coach Xavi

Ilias AKHOMACH

Villarreal
In search of more first-team chances, the tremendously gifted Spanish-Moroccan winger chose to leave Barcelona as a free agent in the summer, eventually signing a four-year deal with the Yellow Submarine. The wizardry on the ball of the Spain U21 international should be much more appreciated at El Madrigal.

Isaac BABADI

PSV
So confident and so talented, the 18-year-old Dutchman with Sierra Leone roots has wasted no time at all making an impact following his promotion this summer to the Eindhoven outfit's first-team squad. Once exclusively thought of as a left-winger, he now tends to display his guile and pace in an attacking midfield role.

Patrick DORGU

Lecce
Some have suggested that the 19-year-old left-back does not have sufficient tactical nous, but that has not stopped the Danish-born teenager of Nigerian extraction emerging as a Serie A revelation this season. Brimming over with bags of energy and attacking intent, he counts Liverpool, Manchester City and Barcelona among his reported admirers.

Unai GOMEZ

Athletic Club
The talented 20-year-old attacking midfielder is blessed with a wide range of attributes: good technique, physical strength, a powerful shot and defensive work ethic. Made his senior debut for Athletic on the opening day of the season against Real Madrid and opened his pro scoring account a fortnight later in a 4-2 home win over Real Betis.

Luca KOLEOSHO

Burnley
Quick and skilful winger who is effortlessly able to beat an opponent on the inside or outside, and was snapped up by Premier League new boys Burnley this summer for a snip at just £2.6m from Espanyol. Born in the US with parental ties to both Italy and Canada, he won the U19 Euros earlier this summer with the *Azzurri* and now has a choice to make on his national team.

SAVIO

Girona
The 19-year-old Brazilian is on loan at Girona from another City Football Group club, Troyes – though he has never played for the Ligue 2 outfit. After a fruitless spell at PSV last season, Savio has played a big part in his new club's early rise to the top of La Liga, with two goals and four assists in his first nine games. A very left-footed winger, reminiscent of Arjen Robben.

Alan MINDA

Cercle Brugge
Maverick Ecuadorian left-winger, 20, with a real flair for producing the unexpected, especially when performing tricks with the outside of his right foot. Lithe and small of stature, yet surprisingly hard to knock off the ball and a composed finisher, Minda is enjoying his first season in Belgium after a summer move from renowned talent factory Independiente del Valle in his home country.

Guillaume RESTES

Toulouse
The Toulouse academy graduate may only be 18, but the goalkeeper has very much looked the part since replacing the popular Maxime Dupe – who left this summer for Anderlecht – as the Violets' last line of defence. Already has racked up a dozen years with Toulouse after joining their youth set-up as a six-year-old. A member of the France Under-21 squad, but eligible for Ivory Coast through his mother.

Spotlight

JAPAN

"The way we used our options…has given the team a lot of confidence"

Hajime Moriyasu's side go into the 2023 Asian Cup as heavy favourites. **Mike Plastow** explains why

Japan have hit the ground running since the World Cup with an impressive series of high-scoring wins, most notably September's 4-1 trouncing of Germany in Wolfsburg. As well as pouring salt into the wounds inflicted by Samurai Blue's shock 2-1 win over Hansi Flick's side at last year's World Cup in Qatar, it was a result that cost Flick his job.

Japan impressed at the World Cup with group victories over both Germany and Spain, before a promising campaign was ended on penalties in the last 16 against the eventual third-place finishers, Croatia.

That win over Germany in the group opener was a masterclass by Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu, who stunned his opponents by bringing most of his best attacking players on all at once in the second half. The strategy worked again in the final group game against Spain. But in September's friendly he took a different approach, sending his team out aggressively, settling in to defend their lead, and then landing two sucker-punches at the finish.

"We played the game as we wanted, not only in the first half but in the second half, too," said Moriyasu. "The way we used our options and maintained our advantage away from home has given the team a lot of confidence."

"Every single one of us," added Japan's new captain Wataru Endo, "believes that we can take on the opponents in front of us, no matter who they are."

Japan's growing confidence after the World Cup was already evident in the unprecedented decision to retain Moriyasu's services for another four years. Since the 1990s, none of Japan's managers were employed for longer than four years, including the big-name foreigners Philippe Troussier, Zico, Alberto Zaccheroni and Vahid Halilhodzic. Moriyasu's appointment in 2018 made him the first Japanese coach in recent times to start a four-year World Cup cycle, and now he has become the first manager of any nationality to carry on into the next cycle as well. If he remains in the post until the North America finals in 2026, he'll be the first-ever manager to lead Japan into two consecutive World Cups.

Moriyasu also led the Under-23s at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, and though he has now stepped back from that role, the two teams have been coordinated to a degree not seen in over 20 years.

If there were any doubts about placing such rare faith in the manager, they were swept aside by Japan's strong performances since Qatar. The team returned to action in March with a 1-1 draw with Uruguay and a narrow 2-1 defeat to Colombia, but then the goal rush began. In June, Japan trounced El Salvador 6-0 and Peru 4-1, and they followed that up with that 4-1 win over Germany and a 4-2 victory against Turkey in September, netting 18 goals in only four games against quality opponents. The latter result led to yet another managerial casualty, with Stefan Kuntz losing his job as Turkey coach just days after the defeat.

Of course, it is always hard to assess the results of friendly internationals, especially at the start of a new World Cup cycle when coaches are trying new things and blooding fresh players. But the challenge of taking on Germany away from home, off the back of last year's shock victory in Qatar and with Flick's own job already on the line, cannot be understated.

Trouncing...Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu celebrates his team's 4-1 victory over Germany

Victorious...Japan's players celebrate a goal against Germany

In the event, Japan had it very much their own way. Junya Ito put the visitors in front after only 11 minutes. Leroy Sane pulled one back for Germany, but Ayase Ueda's 22nd-minute goal quickly restored Japan's lead for the remainder of the match. Japan produced 11 shots on target against Germany's three, and late goals by Takuma Asano and Ao Tanaka rounded off a famous victory.

There were other statistics, of course: Germany enjoyed 68 per cent possession and completed 754 passes to Japan's 366. But in a game in which Japan led almost from start to finish, these figures chiefly demonstrate Japan's resolute defending, swift transitions, and lightning counter-attacks.

Three of Japan's goals, predictably, came from the wings, with the other from a break through the middle. First, Yukinari Sugawara powered down the line to cross for Ito to flick in from a tight angle. That pattern was repeated for the second goal, too, when Ito's onward touch from another Sugawara cross found Ueda in position to finish. The third, with Germany pushing forward at the end, was made by substitute Takefusa Kubo, who won the ball inside his own half, raced through alone and, the goalkeeper committed, selflessly laid off for Asano to slot into the empty net. Kubo set up the fourth, too, crossing this time from the right for Tanaka's header.

Moriyasu again used different systems in the two halves, as he had against the Germans in Qatar, but this time the two approaches produced two goals apiece. He started the match with his typical 4-2-3-1 formation before switching to a more defensive three-man backline in the 58th minute. This Japan side has the flexibility as well as the confidence to change its game midway.

Sugawara, now 23, returned to the national side this year after earning his first cap back in 2020 and has quickly established himself as one of Moriyasu's core new faces. The right-back has long been a star-in-waiting. He made his J. League debut for Nagoya Grampus on the opening day of the 2018 season at the age of 17, and has been playing his football at Dutch side AZ since 2019.

Elsewhere, 23-year-old forward Keito Nakamura, who had loan spells in the Netherlands and Belgium before moving to Austria in 2021 and now plays at Reims, has also been newly inducted to the squad and made his debut against Uruguay in March. Players in the 24 to 26 age bracket who should be hitting their peak at the next World Cup include the likes of Takehiro Tomiyasu (Arsenal), Ko Itakura (Borussia Monchengladbach) and Hiroki Ito (Stuttgart) in defence; Ao Tanaka (Fortuna Dusseldorf), Ritsu Doan (Freiburg), Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton) and Reo Hatate (Celtic) in midfield; and Ayase Ueda (Feyenoord) and Daizen Maeda (Celtic) in attack.

Historic victory... Germany 1-4 Japan

Decisive...Takefusa Kubo had a big hand in the friendly win against Germany

Talented playmaker Kubo (Real Sociedad), especially, still only 22, had a somewhat disappointing World Cup in Qatar by his own exceptional standards but has visibly relaxed and grown in the intervening months and could now be on the cusp of great things. His part in the last two goals against Germany was exquisite.

The veterans next time around, such as Wataru Endo (Liverpool), Takuma Asano (Bochum), Junya Ito (Reims), Hidemasa Morita (Sporting) and Daichi Kamada (Lazio) have also continued to grow. It will be particularly fascinating to see what Endo and Kamada can make of the opportunities now presented at their new clubs in the English Premier League and Italy's Serie A.

Several big names have dropped out of the picture, of course, as happens after every World Cup. They include such stalwarts as defenders Yuto Nagatomo, who represented Japan at four World Cups, and Maya Yoshida, who played at three, as well as goalkeeper Shuichi Gonda, midfielder Genki Haraguchi and striker Yuya Osako. The latter, now 33 but performing brilliantly this season for Vissel Kobe in the J. League, may be recalled one last time for the Asian Cup in January in the continuing absence of any other wholly convincing centre-forward. Questions remain, too, about Nagatomo's successor in the left-back position, but Moriyasu has plenty of options to choose from across most of the pitch.

As for young players still waiting in the wings, such names as Kuryu Matsuki and Kashif Bangnagande, both of FC Tokyo, and Joel Chima Fujita (Sint-Truiden), Kota Kawasaki (Kyoto Sanga) and Koki Saito (Sparta Rotterdam) are already on everyone's lips. More can be expected to establish a claim in the months to come.

Japan's series of friendlies continued in October with home games against Canada and Tunisia, before they return to Asian opponents for the second round of World Cup qualifiers in November, where they have been drawn in Group B with Syria, North Korea and either Myanmar or Macau. Japan have qualified for the last seven consecutive World Cups and must be even more highly fancied in the newly expanded, 48-team format.

The Asian Cup in Qatar in January will be the first bellwether of Asia's new World Cup cycle. Japan have won the Asian Cup four times and, under Moriyasu, were runners-up to Qatar at the last tournament in 2019. Japan's campaign commences in Group D, where they face Vietnam, Iraq and Indonesia.

The complication, of course, is that the Asian Cup will be a very different competition from both the World Cup and the recent friendlies against South American and European teams. Japan are at their best playing swiftly into space. The World Cup game nobody wants to mention, the 1-0 defeat to Costa Rica, who dug in deep and hit Japan with just one shot on target all game, may in fact be more representative of what Japan will face in Asia. Japan must guard against receiving a dose of their own medicine.

Japan's recent exploits have lifted them to 19th in the latest FIFA Rankings, but Iran (21st), South Korea (26th) and Australia (27th) are close behind and, as even the eventual world champions, Argentina, discovered in their own World Cup opener against Saudi Arabia (now 57th) in Qatar last year, upsets are always possible. Success against the likes of Germany and Spain is no guarantee of success in Asia. For Moriyasu, the battle has only recommenced.

> "We can take on the opponents in front of us, no matter who they are"
>
> **Japan captain Wataru Endo**

Seeking revenge ...Japan finished second to Qatar at the 2019 Asian Cup

Facetoface

COLLIN BENJAMIN

"We can actually create something really unique"

Since taking charge of Namibia, the former Bundesliga star has steered his country to the Africa Cup of Nations finals

When you took charge of Namibia in June last year, the team had already dropped AFCON qualifying points, and two of your last three games were against the mighty Cameroon. Did you have any expectation of qualifying for the finals?
In all honesty, yes! I looked at the squad, and the core of the team was 29 or 30 years old with many of them having played at the Cup of Nations finals in Egypt in 2019. With Kenya kicked out of the group, and the top two out of only three teams to qualify, I thought we definitely have a chance. I was thinking, "Hey, listen, we can actually create something really unique, nobody's expecting anything from us." For the core group of our players this would probably be a last time to go to the Cup of Nations finals again so we had to give it a shot.

What gave you the hope? Is it the fighting spirit? Is it talent?
Just the hunger. They all want to get out of Namibia and have an opportunity to play in another country. So it's basically that hunger, wanting to succeed, knowing that clubs elsewhere cannot see them at home. The only platform they have to make a name for themselves is the national team.

Did you try to do much to change the way the team played, or just work within your means?
My approach is basically to look at what you have talent-wise but also your personality. I'm of the opinion that I was not the best player, but I could make it and go and play in Germany just because of basic hunger and work ethic. I believe that you have to work if you want to achieve. I felt I had to get them all team-centred and to create an ambition in them. They had to know that they should work towards something, and only through work can you achieve those goals. We had to become a lot fitter and play with more aggression and just learn to make things difficult for your opponent. So, it was basically just those principles. Those are my life principles that I'm just trying to instil in them.

How pivotal was the 1-1 away draw in Cameroon in March, which was the first point the team gained in the qualifying group?
That was huge because that is when the players started believing. No match in central or west Africa is easy and Cameroon hadn't lost at home in a while and the pre-match press conferences were just basically on how many goals we were going to concede. Was it going to be three, four or six? What would we be content with? So, when we got that draw, I was like, "Wow, okay, we have a chance now," and for the players it was like, "Aha, this is possible." That's where basically everything comes down to belief. They started working much harder when they saw the chance, and then when we played Cameroon in the return game in Johannesburg [Namibia's stadia are out of bounds for international football until upgraded] we did everything possible to make it hard for them. We played early afternoon to unsettle them and made it as difficult as possible for them on the field as well. We had the belief that, "Yes, we can actually overcome them."

Where would you rate that 2-1 win over Cameroon in Johannesburg in terms of achievement for Namibian football?
It's obviously huge. And I think that was our ticket to the Nations Cup. And rightfully deserved as well. We are ranked 26th in Africa out of 54 countries, so we are a mid-table team. Cameroon are a top-ten nation, who had just beaten Brazil at the World Cup. It was a result that

showed our potential, and was also a signal and inspiration to every football player within the country to say, "Listen, we can get there," but to stay there, that's the important task, and that's where the work comes in.

And your ambitions for the Cup of Nations finals in January?
You always want to be better than you were yesterday. And that's what we have to work towards. It's just natural that our goal should be that we should become better. Play better and do better than we did last time we were in the finals [Namibia have yet to win a game at the AFCON]. But that obviously depends on preparations. And that's what my main fight is about now. Collectively, as a nation, we have to decide what it is that we actually want from our national team. We formulate goals but then we have to put in the work accordingly. Whether it's from the government side, whether it's from the private sector, but we cannot expect to basically just go on like we have before with scarcely any resources.

You're going to need friendlies and training camps before the tournament. Are you going to get what you need?
I don't know. I really don't know. There was an indication from the government that we'd get support, so we're just hoping and seeing what's going to come in the next few weeks.

For someone who spent most of his career in Germany, that must be very frustrating for you?
Everybody asks me that and the only answer that I can give is: "Yes, it is true." It's not something that I'm going to hide, I do get frustrated. The whole parliament have been congratulating us, influential people, politicians, but we don't need that. We want them to use their influence to at least have a stadium where we can play our matches, so that these players actually have something to dream about and people to cheer for them. If you want to compete on this continental stage, you need to win your home games and for us that's not possible as long as our stadium is banned because it needs to be upgraded.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

ILDEFONS LIMA

"I wasn't Messi, but I played with my soul"

Andorra's greatest-ever player finally hangs up his boots after 26 years, 137 caps and 11 goals

Why did you decide that now was the right time to retire?
I'm almost 44 and it's not easy to still play professional football. I was mentally and physically tired. It wasn't a difficult decision. I have other things to do in my life. A lot of people have called from around the world to congratulate me on my career. I wasn't phenomenal with my feet like Messi, but I played with my soul, my heart and everything I have.

You won 137 caps for Andorra. How satisfying was it to represent your country so many times?
I love football. I started when I was 17, with our second official game against Estonia, and I had no idea I was going to play for that long. I was so proud to represent my country. I was always happy when I received a call-up. Andorra is a very small country, but I was lucky to play against big players. It was fantastic. I saw our growth and I was very happy with it.

How did you feel when you played your final game?
It was very emotional. I decided to play my last game in Switzerland. I lived there for two years and played in the first division, so I have some feelings for the country. When the coach decided to replace me, the whole stadium gave me a standing ovation. I know playing football for 26 years isn't normal, but I didn't expect that. That's a moment I'll remember forever. I understand that I achieved something extraordinary.

You have the world record for the longest men's international career. What does that mean to you?
Records are made to be surpassed. Maybe one day there will be another crazy player who will play to 43 like me, but I've had many amazing moments in my career and collecting them has been the most important thing – playing at Wembley, playing against the Brazilian Ronaldo, winning games for our small country. I think that's the soul of everything I do. People talk about records but I'm happier about those moments that will last forever.

With all the challenges Andorra face at international level, did you ever struggle to keep going and feel like you were making progress?
Sometimes it was very difficult to stay motivated. More so at the beginning because now we're getting more positive results. We wanted to be competitive, but it was very difficult to win a game. In the end, you play football to win. We didn't win for many years, but we worked very hard for moments like beating San Marino and Hungary. That makes you feel proud. Putting on the shirt of your national team is the biggest motivation to fight on the pitch.

You won six games with Andorra. Which of those victories meant the most?
The most important was against Hungary. There's a big difference between the two countries so that was the best one. But, obviously, I remember the game against San Marino because we'd gone many years without winning and it was the same for them. Everybody was saying it was the worst friendly in history. I was more nervous playing San Marino than England because when you play against another small team, you have to win. We won and I scored our first goal. That took a lot of pressure off us. I think the dynamic of our results changed that day.

In what ways have you seen football in Andorra change over the last 26 years?
Everything's changed. When we went to Estonia in 1997, we didn't know anything about their players or their tactics. Now we know everything about our opponents. You have all the things you need to be ready for the game. Back then, you ate what you found in the hotel and journeys were like a road trip. Now it's perfect. We're a small country but we have the conditions of a big one. We have more time to rest and to prepare for games. ➤

How has Andorra's reputation improved during that time?
I'm proud because, throughout my career, I wanted people to know about Andorra. I liked to explain our reality; that we're normal people, and that we're lucky to play with our national team and our football is growing. Now the whole team are professional footballers and I think people have to respect that. People know more about us now. We're working hard to do things better and I'm so happy about that.

What difference has the introduction of the UEFA Nations League made?
It's very important for small countries. We are growing by playing in the Nations League. We play against small teams and we're competitive. When we play against big teams, it's not easy to beat us now. Sometimes we cause surprises. It's nice because when I started with the national team nobody wanted to play against Andorra. With this competition, we've evolved and become more competitive. We're not the same Andorra we were 20 years ago.

If you could relive just one match from your international career, which would it be?
In 1998, we played a friendly against Brazil a week before the World Cup. We were just starting to play international football and then one day you're next to Ronaldo, Rivaldo, Roberto Carlos and all these players. France won that World Cup and the first home game they played after becoming world champions was against Andorra in Paris. The trophy was there and the Stade de France was full. In those four months, our lives changed.

You're also Andorra's record goalscorer with 11 goals. Which is your favourite?
I especially remember scoring at Lansdowne Road against Ireland. It was the first goal of the game and I'll never forget the silence in the stadium for the next ten seconds. The goal I scored against San Marino helped change the dynamic of the national team. I also remember scoring against Wales. That was the first game in our new stadium so I was the first person to score there.

Early days... Lima challenges Laurent Blanc in a Euro 2000 qualifier in 1998

Historic goal...Lima celebrates scoring against Wales

Heroic send off... Lima leaves the pitch after his last-ever match

Wembley visit...Lima dives in for a tackle on England's Steven Gerrard in June 2009

You captained Andorra many times. How did you approach that role?
I was so proud to be the captain. It was a very important achievement for me. I couldn't ask for anything more from football. I tried to explain to the young players what would happen when they became professionals, what problems they would have and what they would have to do in difficult games for us. I tried to be like a father because of my age. Some of my team-mates hadn't been born when I started to play for the national team. I tried to share my experience because one day one of them would be taking my position.

You spent most of your club career outside Andorra. What did you learn from experiencing life and football in different countries?
It opens your mind and helps make you a better person. I went to Greece, Mexico, Italy, Spain and Switzerland. You have to learn the culture. When I went to Greece and Italy, the first thing I tried to do was learn the language so I could talk to people. When I was in different countries, I wanted to integrate. You're going to another home and I think you have to respect that.

You've developed an incredible shirt collection. Where does that passion come from?
I've loved football shirts since I was a child. My brother Toni played in the first division in Spain. He's nine years older than me so there were always shirts at home. In my second game against Latvia, I swapped shirts with Mihails Zemlinskis and started to collect them. Now I have more than 1,200. One day I might have to open a football museum because I have a lot of amazing shirts from some of the top players in Europe – Cristiano Ronaldo, Andriy Shevchenko, Robin van Persie, Fernando Torres, Harry Kane. It's madness for me. It's a different way to explain your career and the history of football.

What are your plans now that you've retired from football?
During the last year, I passed the exam for my UEFA A Licence. I want to rest a bit because I've been playing a long time and I'm a little bit tired, but I'm going to continue doing sports. I love running. Last year I did a half marathon and I'm going to do more. Obviously, I want to spend more time with my family now I'm not training. I'm enjoying being with my wife and our daughters.

Interview by Sean Cole

> "I especially remember scoring at Lansdowne Road against Ireland. It was the first goal of the game and I'll never forget the silence in the stadium for the next ten seconds"

Rubbing shoulders ...Lima jokes with Cristiano Ronaldo during a 2018 World Cup qualifying tie

JOSIP JURANOVIC

"Joining Union Berlin was the right decision"

The former Celtic right-back discusses his new club and his excitement at Union Berlin's debut in the Champions League

You grew up in Zagreb and played for local third-tier club Dubrava, yet were never picked up by Dinamo Zagreb – was that a disappointment to you?
No, not really. Above all, I enjoyed playing football and I didn't think about clubs who would be interested in signing me. When the call came from Hajduk Split I was happy, because I knew it was a big step forward for my football career.

Initially you were an attacking midfielder but at Hajduk you started playing at right-back, the position you play currently. Is that now your favourite role?
Yes, I'm happy playing as a right-back or wing-back. It's true that earlier I played in midfield, but the then-Hajduk coach Damir Buric fielded me at right-back, where I became a regular.

Who was your idol when you were growing up?
My favourite team was Barcelona. I was delighted especially with their midfield, with Xavi, Iniesta, Busquets and Messi. And, of course, Messi was my idol.

You spent five-and-a-half years at Hajduk. Although there wasn't any silverware, I guess it was a memorable period given the amazing love and passion people in Split have for the club. What can you say about your time with Hajduk?
Indeed, it was a special experience. I really enjoyed my time in Split. I arrived there as a kid and that time was part of me growing up. I became independent, and Split practically became my home. I can be grateful to Hajduk for my development as a professional football player, and I always love going back to Split.

You received the Fair Play award for your move in a league game against Rijeka back in August 2018. Tell us how it happened.
The referee called a foul and we got a free-kick near the edge of the box. I knew that it wasn't a foul, I was captain and I went to the referee and told him that I'm sure it wasn't a foul and then he changed his call [the match ended in a 1-1 draw].

In summer 2020 you moved to Legia Warsaw, where you won the league title, but only stayed one season before moving to Celtic. What can you say about your time in Poland?
I had a great time there. That season with Legia turned out to be my springboard to the big scene. It was an amazing season. The whole team played on a very high level. I won my first-ever title there and also became a [regular] Croatia international.

The then-Legia coach Czeslaw Michniewicz described you as a top player and a great person. Tell us what happened in your last game for Legia.
In the build-up to a massive game in the play-offs for the Europa League, away against Slavia Prague, I had a muscle problem. I trained with tape and I wasn't sure if I'd be fully fit for that match. The deal with Celtic was already finished, but I was keen to help Legia in that game and to have a farewell in the best way possible. I told the coach that I'd be ready, I took painkillers, and it all went well. I played 90 minutes, I scored and we drew 2-2 [Legia won the return leg 2-1 a week later to qualify for Europa League].

You are being modest. The goal you scored was spectacular!
Yes, it was a great goal. I received the ball in our half, started a solo run and I had quite a lot of open space in front of me. I took advantage of nobody closing me down and then took a shot at goal from 20 metres and the ball hit the top corner. It was the best goal I have ever scored. ➤

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At Celtic you were doing very well. You won the league title and played in the Champions League for the first time. What are your memories from your time in Scotland?
It was a fantastic time. Celtic has amazing fans. The clubs I played for before had great fans too, but in Glasgow it was different. When I went out to the city, there were always fans who wanted to take pictures. We played really well, we dominated, we won both the league title and the Scottish League Cup. I really enjoyed my time in Glasgow. We played practically each home game in front of a 60,000 crowd. It's something one day I can tell my children.

While you were playing at the World Cup in Qatar, Celtic signed another right-back, Alistair Johnston. You then left the club for Union Berlin in January. Were you sad to leave Celtic Park?
I had a great time at Celtic. It's true that it was hard for me when the farewell came, but we reached an agreement about my transfer and I was ready for a new challenge. I stayed in touch with many guys at Celtic. Those are friendships for my whole life.

During and after the World Cup there were rumours about a possible transfer to the likes of Barcelona and Chelsea. Was there any truth to those stories?
No, I can't talk about this. But you know the saying: "There is no smoke without fire". In any case, I'm now with Union Berlin and I'm very happy here.

Celtic hero... Juranovic played over 50 games in Scotland

New challenge ...Juranovic in action in the Bundesliga this season

World Cup star...Juranovic competes with Argentina's Lionel Messi as Croatia finished third at Qatar 2022

Goalscoring right-back... Juranovic notches his first Bundesliga goal from the penalty spot v Wolfsburg

Union Berlin don't have a big reputation. Not so long ago they were a second-tier club and they have a relatively small stadium. What was your first reaction after you learned about the offer?
I was happy when I learned about the offer from Union. I knew that they are a stable club, which is getting better and better from year to year. After talking with the sports director and the head coach, I had no doubts that joining Union Berlin was the right decision for me.

What have you learned about the club, the team and the fans since arriving in January?
When I arrived, I was puzzled only about one thing. It looked strange to me that of the four stands only one had seats. But when, during the warm-up before my first home game, I saw the packed stands and 23,000 supporters singing, I was really impressed. We have a really top atmosphere in our stadium. In a nutshell, I have only highly positive impressions about the club and the team, and I will do my best to help Union have another successful season.

> "Celtic has amazing fans. The clubs I played for before had great fans too, but in Glasgow it was different"

This season Union are playing Champions League football for the first time. What were your expectations beforehand?
Everybody at the club and our fans were excited about it. Of course, our main job is to do well in the Bundesliga, but we couldn't wait to play in the Champions League. We have an interesting, attractive and surely also very difficult group [with Real Madrid, Napoli and Braga] and we'll try to give our best.

Your manager, Urs Fischer, was named Bundesliga Coach of the Year. How would you describe him as a coach and person?
He is a very positive guy. He takes care of even the smallest details in match preparation. He is doing a great job with Union. He guided the club to promotion to the Bundesliga and then achieved in each season good results, guiding the club first to the Conference League, then to the Europa League and now to the Champions League. What else is there to say? The results speak for themselves.

Croatia is a small country and has a relatively low-profile league, but the national team is one of the best in the world. What's the secret to that success?
The league is growing; especially the top four clubs Dinamo Zagreb, Hajduk Split, Rijeka and Osijek. Don't forget that at the World Cup we had six players in the squad from HNL [Croatia's top flight].

The fact that we have won three medals [runners-up at the 2018 World Cup, third place at the 2022 World Cup and second place at the 2022-23 Nations League] speaks for itself. We have great team-work, we are always eager to prove ourselves and we fight for each other.

Getting so close to winning a first title must give you extra motivation to win Euro 2024?
There will be many teams who will aim to go all the way. Our desire is that people remember us as a small country with big successes at major tournaments.

Interview by Vladimir Novak

Glenn Moore

Transfer market growth

As the women's game continues to grow, so has transfer spending

For years, the closing of the summer transfer window has received as much attention in the men's game as all but the biggest matches. This year, for perhaps the first time, it was an occasion in the women's game too.

That was especially evident at Manchester United. Just as Erik ten Hag did on the men's side, women's coach Marc Skinner signed four players on deadline day, bringing in Spain midfielder Irene Guerrero (Atletico Madrid), England defender Gabby George (Everton), American goalkeeper Phallon Tullis-Joyce (OL Reign) and France forward Melvine Malard (Lyon). It was a busy day for admin staff, with several players also exiting Old Trafford.

Malard was a loan, but the others cost significant fees, another relatively new development. Having not been fully professional until recently, most players were on short contracts and changed clubs on their conclusion; there was not the money to tie players to long deals, or to buy them out of existing ones.

That has now changed. While the market remains in its infancy, and transfers fees are small, the direction of travel is clear. This summer, according to FIFA, $3 million was spent on international transfers (which are recorded on their transfer matching system). Another $1m is likely to have gone on domestic moves.

Compared to the staggering $700m paid just in agent fees for cross-border transfers by men's teams in the summer transfer window, that is just loose change, but it is double the previous record.

Of the highest-ever 25 fees paid, all but one have happened in the 2020s – and that was an oddity, the then-record €235,000 (£200,000) acquisition of Milene Domingues in 2002, when the sport was largely amateur, by Rayo Vallecano from Fiammamonza.

Domingues is better known as the then-wife of Brazilian star Ronaldo and her move, which followed his joining Real Madrid from Inter, was for commercial reasons since regulations prevented her actually playing in the Spanish league.

That deal aside, perhaps the first major transfer was Megan Rapinoe's $100,000 (£80,000) move in 2011 from Philadelphia Independence to Florida-based Magic Jack in the WPS, a precursor to NWSL that, like both clubs involved, folded the following year.

In 2017 came the next big jump, Paris Saint-Germain paying €150,000 (£134,000) to Juvisy for forward Kadidiatou Diani, still a key figure for France, though now with Lyon.

> This summer, according to FIFA, $3 million was spent on international transfers. Another $1m is likely to have gone on domestic moves

Domingues' record was finally broken in 2020 when Chelsea paid Wolfsburg £250,000 for Denmark captain Pernille Harder. That was probably matched when Crystal Dunn moved soon after from North Carolina Courage via OL Reign to Portland Thorns but NWSL transfers, as will be explained later, are hard to quantify.

A new record was definitely set in September 2022 when England midfielder Keira Walsh left Manchester City for Barcelona for £400,000.

The fees, though, are only part of it. More than 80 per cent of moves are free transfers and, as with the men's game, in some cases they're not really "free". There were no fees paid in this summer's moves by Diani and Harder to Lyon and Bayern Munich respectively, nor Alessia Russo to Arsenal (six months after Manchester United reportedly turned down a world-record £500,000 bid from the Gunners), but the signing-on fees and salaries will be hefty.

Such moves leave plenty of scope for agents and it's noticeable that even this embryonic market resulted in 30 per cent of the outlay on cross-border transfers being swallowed by agents.

While most of the big spenders are similar to those in the men's game (with the exception of Lyon and, to

Original record breaker...Milene Domingues is presented as Rayo Vallecano's new signing in 2002

Old Trafford welcome...Irene Guerrero, one of four deadline day signings for Manchester United Women

a lesser extent, Wolfsburg), one major difference is the involvement of American clubs – and the nature of it.

As in many US sports, young players arrive via the college system and are signed in an annual draft. But they have little agency in where they go and some, like Mia Fishel, Chelsea's new recruit from Mexican club Tigres UANL, have declined to enter. Once in the system, players are "traded" with little choice in the matter – which has led some, such as Christen Press, to refuse the move, or to go overseas instead.

There is also "discovery", in which teams can lay claim to players outside the US, and be compensated if someone else signs them, which has meant some players not moving to NWSL.

As well as cash, trades often involve clubs swapping draft picks, discovery rights and international slots, elements that are hard to qualify financially, making internal NWSL deals hard to price.

While drafting and trading work fine in sports where the US leagues are globally dominant – such as American football, baseball and ice hockey – the NWSL has strong competition from European leagues. In response, allocation money (to increase wages) and a measure of free agency has been introduced for six-year veterans. But players that are suddenly told they've been sold to a club thousands of miles away, and who are not in the national team set-up, could increasingly explore European options.

As with the men's game, there is also a new and potentially disruptive element in Saudi Arabia. While the men's Saudi Pro League has taken up the attention with a series of headline signings, the nascent women's league has also lured players from outside the Kingdom.

To date they have not been major names, but the development is even more controversial than in the men's game given the Kingdom's record on homosexuality and women's rights. Same-sex relationships are widespread in the women's game and the protests that forced the withdrawal of Visit Saudi as a sponsor of the 2023 Women's World Cup illustrated the suspicion with which many view the country's recent enthusiasm for women's football.

However, not everyone views the issue through a western prism. Most major recruits thus far have been African internationals, and when English-born Nigeria international Ashleigh Plumptre said she was joining Al Ittihad from Leicester City the social media reaction in Nigeria was positive.

Whether this new destination proves as alluring as in the men's game remains to be seen. For the foreseeable future, though, it will mainly be the European clubs paying the big money.

Round-up

"Se Acabo"..."It's Over"

SPANISH PLAYERS WIN ON AND OFF THE PITCH

Spanish players continued to harness the prestige and profile created by their World Cup win to drive change. A strike that wiped out the opening weekend of the new league season ended with a positive resolution on pay, while a threatened boycott of the national team forced the exit of the federation's general secretary, Andreu Camps, who followed president Luis Rubiales and team manager Jorge Vilda out of the door.

That was part of a deal mediated by government that included the exit of several senior officials and structural changes. Replacement coach Montse Tome's role also looked precarious after calling up 21 players against their will for September's UEFA Nations League games, but she now looks set to stay. In those games, Spain won 3-2 in Sweden before beating Switzerland 5-0 at home.

ASIAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE COMING

After three successful pilot events – with another planned for Thailand and Uzbekistan in November – the AFC announced an Asian Champions League will take place in 2024-25.

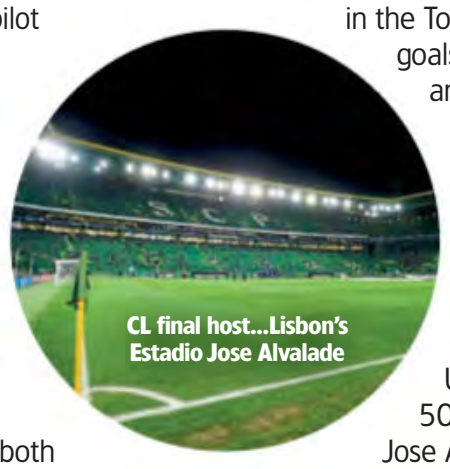
AULD ENEMIES SETTLE WITH FAs

England and Scotland both settled disputes with their FAs, coincidentally prior to their Nations League meeting, won 2-1 by England. The Lionesses concluded an agreement on performances bonuses, commercial appearances and some non-pay related issues. The Scottish players withdrew legal action based around gender inequalities in pay, conditions and resources.

Auld enemies...England took on Scotland in the Nations League at Sunderland's Stadium of Light

CANADA WILL DEFEND CROWN AT PARIS 2024

Canada clinched the second CONCACAF Olympic spot after beating Jamaica in a two-leg play-off. The defending champions won 2-0 in Kingston (Nichelle Prince, Adriana Leon). Though Drew Spence halved the deficit to unnerve the 30,000-crowd in the Toronto return, further goals from Cloe Lacasse and Jordyn Huitema earned Canada a 4-1 aggregate win. The USA had already claimed the first slot.



CL final host...Lisbon's Estadio Jose Alvalade

LISBON TO HOST 2025 UCL FINAL

UEFA chose the 50,000-capacity Estadio Jose Alvalade in Lisbon, home of Sporting, to host the 2025 Women's Champions League final. Lisbon previously hosted in 2014, at Belenenses' Estadio do Restalo, attracting 11,217 supporters. Bilbao's San Mames will stage the 2024 final.

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There's special features previewing the Club World Cup and the new African Champions League campaign, while we also interview Augsburg's Japhet Tanganga and Brighton Women's Pauline Bremer.

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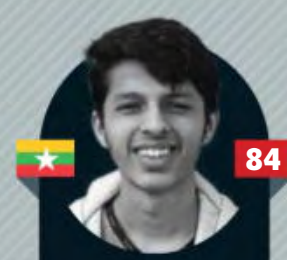

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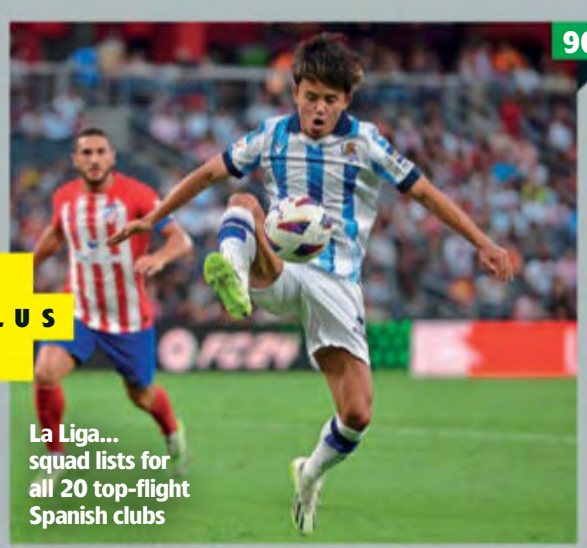
STEVE MENARY
Solomon Islands & Cook Islands



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Australia...A-League Men's 2023-24 season preview

Australia

SIMON HILL

A-League exodus

Large number of player departures blows new season's title race wide open

Preview

Post-Qatar, optimism was high that the A-League would be the beneficiary of the excitement generated by the Socceroos' surprise run to the knockout phase of the Men's World Cup, yet those hopes proved short-lived.

Ten months later, and Australia is again basking in the glow of a major tournament. The Matildas' run to the semi-finals of the Women's World Cup on home soil brought the feel-good factor back. Can the domestic competition do better this time?

The A-League Women's is already showing signs of it, with record membership levels reported across the league. The Men's equivalent however, is less certain.

There is still anger at the hugely unpopular decision to sell off the competition's Grand Finals for the next three years to Sydney. That, combined with an exodus of talent and a lack of big-name signings, meant that there

Domestic switch ...William Wilson has left Melbourne Victory for reigning champions Central Coast Mariners

New arrival... Sydney FC's Fabio Gomes

A-League contenders ...Melbourne City celebrate scoring in the pre-season Australia Cup

was very little buzz for the start of the season on October 20.

Reigning champions Central Coast Mariners have lost half the team that won the title in such thrilling fashion. Sammy Silvera (Middlesbrough), James McGarry (Aberdeen), Jason Cummings (Mohun Bagan), Beni Nkololo (Al Orobah) and Nectarios Triantis (Sunderland) have all departed, along with inspirational coach Nick Montgomery, who has become the new boss of Hibernian.

The repatriation of Alou Kuol (the older brother of Newcastle United's Garang), and imports Mikael Doka and Angel Torres, along with Melbourne Victory's promising midfielder William Wilson, may alleviate some of the damage, but the Mariners could well be drawn back to the pack.

Melbourne City – Premiers for the last three years, but losers in both of the last two Grand Finals – have been similarly shorn. Jordy Bos has gone to Westerlo, Aiden O'Neill to Standard Liege, Marco Tilio to Celtic and Tom Glover to Middlesbrough. But Tolgay Arslan from Udinese looks an astute signing, and the return of Aziz Behich should compensate for the loss of Bos and the retirement of club captain Scott Jamieson.

In what has become a theme across the league, Western Sydney Wanderers have also been asset-stripped. Calem Nieuwenhof has gone to Hearts, Kusini Yengi to Portsmouth, while imports Morgan Schneiderlin, Yeni Ngbakoto, Amor Layouni and Romain Amalfitano all opted to look elsewhere.

Still, Wanderers looked potent during pre-season in the Australia Cup, with new Swedish striker Marcus Antonsson impressing in the win over Adelaide United, and Lachlan Brook helping himself to five goals in the thumping of second-tier Floreat Athena.

Across the city, Sydney FC have also had to rebuild, with Adam Le Fondre going to Hibernian and Adrian Segecic to Dordrecht, while veteran skipper Alex Wilkinson has retired. Le Fondre's replacement in attack will be the 26-year-old Brazilian Fabio Gomes (on loan from Atletico Mineiro), while Socceroos defender Joel King returns on a full-time basis after a loan spell last season.

Adelaide fans are concerned at the lack of signings – especially as club legend Craig Goodwin has opted for a second spell in Saudi Arabia with Al Wehda and young midfielder Louis D'Arrigo has joined Lechia Gdansk in Poland – although Manchester United academy graduate Ryan Tunicliffe has arrived from Portsmouth.

> **An exodus of talent and a lack of big-name signings meant that there was very little buzz for the start of the season on October 20**

Melbourne Victory, the biggest club in the land, had a horrible campaign last time around – and Victory fans are unhappy that the aforementioned Will Wilson has been allowed to join the Mariners. Adama Traore returns for a third spell with the club, while Tony Popovic has taken a gamble on Daniel Arzani, who remains one of Australia's greatest unfulfilled talents.

Brisbane Roar's headline captures are former Melbourne City midfielder Florin Berenguer and 18-year-old Shae Cahill – son of Socceroos legend Tim – as they prepare to return to Suncorp Stadium on a more permanent basis under the new leadership of chairman Kaz Patafta and CEO Zac Anderson (both former A-League players).

Macarthur have added ex-Marseille striker Valere Germain to their ranks, as they attempt to put a see-saw 2022-23 season behind them, in which they won the Australia Cup but finished bottom of the league. They will also feature in the AFC Cup, along with the Mariners – Melbourne City being Australia's sole representative in the senior competition, the AFC Champions League.

Of the rest, Western United have made some interesting signings, with Daniel Penha (ex-Newcastle Jets) and Riku Danzaki (ex-Brisbane Roar) being the pick. Offset against that is the retirement of Alessandro Diamanti, and the departures of Leo Lacroix, Neil Kilkenny and Connor Pain.

Wellington Phoenix begin life under new coach Giancarlo Italiano having lost the spine of Ufuk Talay's team. Steven Ugarkovic, Oli Sail, Clayton Lewis, Callan Elliot and Yan Sasse have all left – so far only Mohamed Al Taay and Jack Duncan (both from Newcastle Jets) have arrived.

Perth Glory have appointed Alen Stajcic to succeed Ruben Zadkovich as coach. Glory too, have lost a host of players, most notably the promising Keegan Jelacic, who has joined Gent; while Newcastle Jets have restocked their playing ranks with a host of domestic signings, including Jacob Dowse and Daniel Wilmering.

Indonesia

JOHN DUERDEN

Host ground ...the newly built Jakarta International Stadium

Preview

Indonesia ready to host Under-17 World Cup

Hosting duties for FIFA tournament offers light at the end of a dark tunnel for the Southeast Asian nation

If you had asked any of Indonesia's 275 million inhabitants back in April whether the country would be hosting a major FIFA tournament in 2023, no one would have answered in the affirmative. Yet November 10 will see the start of the Under-17 World Cup with Indonesia taking on Ecuador on home soil. The nation is waiting and watching.

Much has changed since March when the Southeast Asian nation was stripped of the hosting rights for the Under-20 World Cup that was due to start in May. Just ahead of the draw to be held in Bali, the governor of the beautiful island said that he did not want the Israel team on its soil. The draw was not held and this football-loving country feared the worst. Indonesia has not appeared at any World Cup since 1938, under the guise of the Dutch East Indies, so to have the Under-20 competition on its soil was a huge deal. President Joko Widodo took a personal interest and the government did all it could to stop FIFA taking the tournament away, sending cabinet minister, FA chief and former Internazionale owner Erick Thohir to meet Gianni Infantino.

It didn't work. FIFA quickly handed the reins over to Argentina and a lot of angry people in Indonesia – their ire directed at their politicians and not FIFA – were resigned to being out in the wilderness for years to come. After the Kanjuruhan Stadium disaster of October 2022, which cost the lives of 135 fans, it was a chance for Indonesia to improve infrastructure, policing and organisation and to show the world that it had improved. Yet it looked like all the hard work had been for nothing

Under-17 World Cup holders...Brazil beat Mexico 2-0 in the 2019 final on home soil

and there were fears that FIFA would not look in Jakarta's direction for years, or even decades.

Those worries were misplaced. After concerns expressed over the readiness of its infrastructure, Peru withdrew as Under-17 hosts in April and in June FIFA went back to Indonesia. It was seen as a big deal and a show of faith in the world's fourth most populous country.

The scale is a bit smaller than the Under-20 edition that never happened, with the action confined to the island of Java, home to the biggest cities and 145 million people. There are four venues: the Jakarta International Stadium opened just last year and, with a capacity of 82,000, is one of the largest in Asia. The central Javanese city of Surakarta – also known as Solo – will host half of the 16 knockout games with Bandung and Surabaya also pitching in.

Preparations had already been made giving domestic arenas the necessary renovations. Now it is time to get ready on the pitch too.

Bima Sakti, a former international and a coach within the Indonesian setup since 2017, has been appointed to lead the hosts in a definite decision to help local coaching talent. Indonesia are underdogs, but just being there for the first time is a bonus. There has been some decent talent coming through of late and a group containing Morocco, Panama and Ecuador offers some possibilities when added to fervent home support. With only eight of the 24 teams falling at the first hurdle, there is hope for the *Merah Putih*.

> **There were fears that FIFA would not look in Jakarta's direction for years, or even decades. Those worries were misplaced**

If Group A looks wide open then there are two genuine heavyweights in Group C. Brazil and England have won the last two editions between them and will be hoping to have their places in the last 16 sealed by the time they meet in their final group game. There is hope for Iran and New Caledonia given that six of the third-placed teams will make it through.

Spain, four-time finalists but not yet champions, are in Group B along with another past runner-up in Mali. Canada have experience but only in the group stage while Uzbekistan will be hoping to make a splash playing in their home continent. Group D sees Argentina and Japan, two experienced teams at this competition, dealing with the relatively inexperienced Senegal and Poland.

No team has appeared on this stage more than the United States (17 previous appearances), but anything could happen against their Group E opponents France, South Korea and Burkina Faso. In Group F there are two-time champions Mexico, Venezuela, New Zealand and Germany, who would love to put a smile back on the faces of supporters back home.

Indonesian fans probably don't care too much about the eventual winner; just to have a World Cup is a big deal and for all to go smoothly would be a big win.

THE DRAW

GROUP A
- Ecuador
- Indonesia
- Morocco
- Panama

GROUP B
- Canada
- Mali
- Spain
- Uzbekistan

GROUP C
- Brazil
- England
- Iran
- New Caledonia

GROUP D
- Argentina
- Japan
- Poland
- Senegal

GROUP E
- Burkina Faso
- France
- South Korea
- United States

GROUP F
- Germany
- Mexico
- New Zealand
- Venezuela

Football-mad nation... hosts Indonesia will be well supported

Myanmar

NEEL SHELAT

Shan United's three-year unbeaten streak

The Myanmar National League's defending champions' long run without defeat was far from straightforward

Three years unbeaten...Shan United line up in the AFC Cup *Credit: Instagram @Shan.United*

There's something special attached to unbeaten runs in football; something about the air of invincibility they foster, which is why Arsenal's 2003-04 season is so ingrained in the history of English football. Arsene Wenger's Gunners are rightly deified for going a full season without defeat, but earlier this year Myanmar outfit Shan United marked three unbeaten years.

There are, inevitably, caveats and complications to the story, which begins in 2015. Before then, Shan United did not mean anything, with the club instead known as Kanbawza. Founded in Yangon in the early 2000s, Kanbawza won two Myanmar Premier League titles in the amateur era and were among the founding members of the professional National League, but did not achieve any success in the form of silverware thereafter.

When the club's status changed to professional with the foundation of the new league in 2009, they moved base to the city of Taunggyi, the capital of Shan State. So, in 2015, they changed their name to better reflect their new location.

Soon thereafter, Shan United lifted their first title in the professional era by winning the league in 2017. Their first title defence failed by the margin of just a single point against Yangon United, but they were back on top of

Experienced defender...Nanda Kyaw in international action for Myanmar

the standings by the end of 2019. Having established themselves as serious title contenders, the Shan Warriors also began to frequent the AFC Cup, Asia's Europa League equivalent, where they would face their toughest tests against stronger sides from the continent.

It was in that competition, in early 2020, that Shan United suffered their last defeat before their three-year streak, against Singaporean side Tampines Rovers.

Since then, plenty has happened – not least a global pandemic. After that defeat to Tampines Rovers, Shan United did not play again for over five months. When they returned to action in August 2020, they only played league fixtures for the rest of the year. They won each of the 11 games they played after the restart en route to the title, for which every result was important as they only won by a margin of three points.

The following year, Shan United did not have a single match to play after football in Myanmar was completely cancelled due to the country's Spring Revolution, a protest in opposition to the coup d'état staged early in the year. As a result, they also withdrew from the AFC Champions League despite qualifying by winning the previous season's league title.

The Myanmar National League was back in action in 2022, albeit all played in a centralised venue due to security concerns, though the cup did not resume. So, Shan United only had to play the league campaign, which they won quite comfortably with an invincible record of 15 wins and three draws in 18 games to extend their unbeaten record to over two years.

With that, the Shan Warriors qualified for the 2023-24 AFC Cup, but that did not commence at the start of the year as usual because Asia's continental club competitions were moving from a year-round to a cross-year format. So they still had another half-season to play exclusively domestically, where they managed to stay unbeaten again to extend their record to over three years.

Shan United's domestic dominance was boosted by the heavily local core of their squad. Between the pandemic and the Spring Revolution, most of the league's foreign players left and, when the league restarted, were not all replaced. As a result, none of the teams came close to filling their foreign player quota, meaning the emphasis on domestic players was increased further. This played into the hands of Shan United, who currently contribute the highest number of players to Myanmar's senior men's national team – including goalkeeper Kyaw Zin Phyo; defenders Nanda Kyaw, Kyaw Zin Lwin and Ye Min Thu; and attacking midfielders Myat Kaung Khant and Htet Phyo Wai.

Unsurprisingly, then, the run was brought to an end on the continental stage. In their first AFC Cup match of the season, they were beaten 3-0 in Yangon by Australian outfit Macarthur on September 21 – 45 games and 1,291 days after their previous loss.

While the defeat served as a reminder of Shan United's status within the rest of Asia, their domestic dominance continues and, at the time of writing, they remain unbeaten. If they make it to February, it will mark four years since their last league defeat.

Shan United currently contribute the highest number of players to Myanmar's senior men's national team

End of the run ...Shan United lost 3-0 to Macarthur FC in September
Credit: the-afc.com

Solomon Islands

STEVE MENARY

Football at the Pacific Games

2023 edition provides welcome game time for Pacific nations ahead of World Cup qualifying

Contenders...New Caledonia (L) and Fiji (R) in action in Qatar during the 2022 World Cup qualifiers

2023 Pacific Games hosts... Solomon Islands

The 2023 Pacific Games comes at a vital time for countries that historically found playing regularly already difficult due to the distances involved and were further isolated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Only seven islands entered the 2022 World Cup qualifiers, which were relocated to Qatar last year and blighted by the virus, with Samoa, Tonga and American Samoa not entering and all subsequently dropping out of the FIFA Rankings due to inaction.

With the virus seemingly in retreat, this year's Pacific Games should then provide a vital opportunity for game time, particularly for locally-based players. But the tournament is not without controversy.

Football was first held at the multi-sport Games in 1963, which has been staged at four-year intervals since 1971. New Caledonia have seven gold medals in football and won from 2007 until 2019, when they lost in the final in Samoa's capital of Apia to New Zealand's Under-23 team.

This year's Games in the Solomon Islands have been pushed back from July to November due to COVID-19 and venue construction. The deadline for entries was not until October 6 and the organisers were not giving any pre-deadline details on entrants. Given that the tournament starts six weeks later, the deadline gave precious little time for entrants to organise logistics but most of the main Pacific Islands are expected to contest the football.

The Games have also attracted some controversy for its cost: 1.85 billion Solomon Island dollars (around US$220 million). More than half of that has been spent on facilities, including a new 10,000-seater stadium, which was initially to be funded by Taiwan. In 2019, the Solomon Islands' government was persuaded to derecognise Taiwan and switch recognition to China, which has subsequently funded and built a swathe of the Games' facilities.

This help also extended to some athletes from the Solomon Islands attending a 90-day training camp in China as part of a target of winning 80 medals, with Felipe Vega-Arango, the Spanish coach who managed the Solomons from 2017-18 and returned again in 2021, under some pressure to win a first gold for the hosts. The Solomon Islands' best performance was silver in 1991, 1995 and 2011.

The inclusion of Raphael Lea'i would help Vega-Arango's ambitions but the striker is unlikely to be released by his Bosnian club, Velez Mostar.

Participating countries' ability to field their strongest team is not being helped by the Games now being staged in only a small part of the FIFA window. The Games runs from November 17 to December 2, while the FIFA match window runs from November 13-21. This means that national associations can only force clubs to release players for a small part of the Games at the start. As a result, most sides are likely to rely on players from their domestic leagues.

Tahiti have won five gold medals but the last was in 1995, and the French Polynesians have even bigger problems than the FIFA window. "Six players from AS Pirae will play in the French Cup in Paris on November 19," says head coach Samuel Garcia. "If we have all the players, it is possible to win but that's not the case and the option is to take more experience for the future."

Fiji were semi-finalists four years ago but the last of their two gold medals was in 2003, and the Bula Boys are also likely to be without their captain and star striker, as veteran Roy Krishna has just moved clubs in India to Odisha. Fiji's new coach, Robert Sherman, says: "The Pacific Games is an opportunity to make sure that I can be very familiar with our domestic players. We are building to a longer-term objective, but we want to be competitive and we want to win."

Like Tahiti and Fiji, most of the traditionally stronger teams expected to be in Honiara, including seven-time semi-finalists Papua New Guinea, will have the same longer-term aim, which is the start of the Oceania qualifiers for the 2026 World Cup finals next year.

New Caledonia have seven Pacific Games gold medals in football and won from 2007 until 2019

With the next World Cup expanded to 48 teams, Oceania's representation has increased from half a slot to 1.5 slots. Previously, the winner faced an inter-continental play-off from another confederation. Now, the winner qualifies directly and the runner-up goes into that play-off.

For most Pacific islands, that is a tantalising prospect and the Games will provide a vital chance to blood domestic talent to be integrated with overseas players for the World Cup qualifiers.

Terai Bremond... Tahiti will hope to have the ex-Toulouse midfielder available for selection

Cook Islands

STEVE MENARY

Ibrom gives Cook Islands a boost

Football on the South Pacific islands is looking up under a new national academy director

Building for the future... the islands' U16 national academy

After a run of one senior international match in seven years, football in the Cook Islands has had a difficult time. Their only match between 2015 and last year was the ill-fated Oceania World Cup qualifiers, which were controversially relocated to Qatar due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After flying more than 10,000 miles, the Cooks managed a single match – a 2-0 defeat to the Solomon Islands – before the virus decimated the qualifiers and the side returned home without playing another game.

Since then, however, the appointment of Jess Ibrom as national academy director has prompted an upturn, particularly at junior level, with the women's Under-19s finishing fourth at this summer's Oceania Championship in Fiji.

"I've been working hard to incorporate a talent identification programme for players at various age groups, both male and female, not just on the main island of Rarotonga but also in Aitutaki, one of the other islands," says Ibrom.

"I'm looking at players from Under-10s up to the full national team so there is a clear pathway all the way through the age groups. This will then enable CIFA [the Cook Islands Football Association] to be better prepared for OFC tournaments in the future."

Ibrom was previously technical director in Samoa from 2020 until last November and has turned to a pair of consultants he used there with some success to help him in his new post.

> "I've been working hard to incorporate a talent identification programme for players at various age groups, both male and female"
>
> National academy director Jess Ibrom

Alastair McLae is the general manager at Christchurch United in New Zealand, while Russell Gurr is a scout at Ross County in Scotland. Together, the duo run the International Football Consultancy.

Gurr explains: "Since starting in July, we have found over 30 players. These are a mix of all ages, both male and female. We tend to find that most of the players we find either have a biological parent or grandparent born in Cook Islands.

"To date, we have identified players in Australia, New Zealand and Germany and are continuing our search worldwide."

One of the first players to be identified, Deja Pareta of Hibiscus Coast in New Zealand, made her senior debut this year in a friendly against Tahiti. The male senior team also returned to action against the same opponents, and a rusty side were drubbed 9-1 but put in an improved performance three days later, losing only 3-0 against the same opponents.

Ibrom adds: "It's very difficult for the island nations and less developed ones to continually play international fixtures. The games in Tahiti were of significant financial investment and the purpose of these games was to give a benchmark of where we are at the senior level both male and female."

The two matches will likely be the Cook Islands' last before the Pacific Games starts in the Solomon Islands on November 17. Challenging for a first medal at the Games will be hard but the target, says Ibrom, is to be "as competitive as possible on a regular basis and ultimately move up the FIFA Rankings with a more competitive games schedule."

Attracting and integrating an influx of new talent and a programme of matches at the Games should help make that achievable.

National academy director...Jess Ibrom

OCTOBER 27-NOVEMBER 25

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

World Cup qualifiers

The long road to North America 2026 continues in the month ahead. In Asia, with the first round of qualifying completed in October, the second round group stage kicks off in the middle of November with all the big guns joining the party.

Meanwhile, Africa's new-look, six-team group stage gets underway, with teams also taking the opportunity to fine-tune in their last games before the AFCON kicks off in January. South America's marathon qualification process also continues, with Argentina's clashes versus rivals Uruguay – now managed by their former boss Marcelo Bielsa – and Brazil the standout ties.

Arch-rivals... Argentina v Uruguay

CONCACAF Nations League

Following matchdays 3 and 4 in mid-October, November's international window sees both Leagues B and C conclude in the 2023-24 CONCACAF Nations League, while the League A winners and runners-up – undecided at the time of writing – enter the two-legged quarter-finals against seeded nations Mexico, United States, Canada and Costa Rica.

Meanwhile, on the domestic scene in the region, the Central American Cup and Caribbean Cup semi-finals both take place at the end of October/early November, with the finals due end of November/early December.

Defending champions... United States won the 2022-23 edition

CAF Champions League

The battle to be crowned kings of African club football begins on November 24 as the group stage of the 2023-24 CAF Champions League gets underway.

Many of the continent's biggest sides – including holders Al Ahly, 2022 champions Wydad Casablanca and South African giants Mamelodi Sundowns – will get extra preparation for the tournament in the form of the inaugural African Football League. The eight-team round-robin competition began on October 20 and will conclude with a two-legged final on November 5 and 11.

Holders... Al Ahly lift last season's CAF CL trophy

5 unmissable matches

- **Borussia Dortmund v Bayern Munich, November 4**
  With no wins in their last ten *Klassiker* head-to-heads, and after last season's final-day meltdown, this has been a miserable rivalry for Dortmund in recent years. Can they arrest the slide here?
- **Milan v Paris Saint-Germain, November 7**
  In this clash between European pedigree and nouveau riche, last season's CL semi-finalists Milan will be keen to assert their authority. Before this season, the sides hadn't met since two 1-1 draws back in 2001.
- **Ajax v Brighton, November 9**
  Trips like these are what Brighton fans dreamt of when they qualified for Europe for the first time in their history. With Ajax in disarray, it could be a memorable night for the Seagulls.
- **Scotland v Norway, November 19**
  There is every chance here that the home fans at Hampden Park will be celebrating their team qualifying automatically for a major tournament for the first time since 1997.
- **Manchester City v Liverpool, November 25**
  Liverpool's start suggests this could be as engaging as the clashes between the two sides at the peak of their rivalry. For City, this falls within a six-week spell that also includes games with Manchester United, Chelsea and Tottenham.

Elite rivals... Klopp v Pep

Women's UEFA Champions League

Like much of the women's European season, this year's Champions League is beginning later than usual due to the World Cup, with the group stage kicking off on November 14 and 15. At the time of writing, only four teams – holders Barcelona, last season's runners-up Lyon, Bayern Munich and Chelsea – had their places secured, with their group-stage opponents drawn on October 20.

LA LIGA 2023-24

ALAVES

GOALKEEPERS

1	Antonio **SIVERA**	(27) 11.08.96
31	Jesus **OWONO** (Eqg)	(22) 01.03.01
33	Adrian **RODRIGUEZ** (Arg)	(22) 12.12.00
41	Gaizka **GARCIA**	(18) 17.02.05
43	Ruben **MONTERO**	(18) 28.08.05

DEFENDERS

2	Andoni **GOROSABEL**	(27) 04.08.96
3	Ruben **DUARTE**	(28) 18.10.95
4	Aleksandar **SEDLAR** (Srb)	(31) 13.12.91
5	Abdel **ABQAR** (Mar)	(24) 10.03.99
7	Alex **SOLA**	(24) 09.06.99
14	Nahuel **TENAGLIA** (Arg)	(27) 21.02.96
16	Rafa **MARIN**	(21) 19.05.02
19	Nikola **MARAS** (Srb)	(27) 19.12.95
26	Joseda **ALVAREZ**	(22) 22.01.01
27	Javi **LOPEZ**	(21) 25.03.02

MIDFIELDERS

6	Ander **GUEVARA**	(26) 07.07.97
8	Antonio **BLANCO**	(23) 23.07.00
10	Ianis **HAGI** (Rou)	(25) 22.10.98
11	Luis **RIOJA**	(30) 16.10.93
18	Jon **GURIDI**	(28) 28.02.95
23	Carlos **BENAVIDEZ** (Uru)	(25) 30.03.98
28	Ander **SANCHEZ**	(19) 24.01.04
30	Tomas **MENDES**	(18) 21.11.04
35	Selu **DIALLO**	(20) 01.10.03

FORWARDS

9	Jon **KARRIKABURU**	(21) 19.09.02
15	Kike **GARCIA**	(33) 25.11.89
17	Xeber **ALKAIN**	(26) 26.06.97
21	Abde **REBBACH** (Alg)	(25) 11.08.98
29	Joaquin **PANICHELLI** (Arg)	(21) 07.10.02
32	Samu **OMORODION**	(19) 05.05.04
34	Giorgi **GAGUA** (Geo)	(22) 10.10.01
42	Unai **ROPERO**	(21) 20.11.01

COACH

	Luis **GARCIA**	(50) 01.12.72

ALMERIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Diego **MARINO**	(33) 09.05.90
13	**FERNANDO**	(33) 10.06.90
25	Luis **MAXIMIANO** (Por)	(24) 05.01.99
37	Bruno **IRIBARNE**	(19) 18.08.04

DEFENDERS

2	**KAIKY** (Bra)	(19) 12.01.04
3	**EDGAR** Gonzalez	(26) 01.04.97
15	Sergio **AKIEME** (Eqg)	(25) 16.12.97
17	Alejandro **POZO**	(24) 22.02.99
18	Marc **PUBILL**	(20) 20.06.03
20	Alex **CENTELLES**	(24) 30.08.99
21	**CHUMI**	(24) 02.03.99
22	Cesar **MONTES** (Mex)	(26) 24.02.97
24	Houboulang **MENDES** (Gnb)	(25) 04.05.98
27	Paco **SANZ**	(18) 15.11.04

MIDFIELDERS

4	Iddrisu **BABA** (Gha)	(27) 22.01.96
5	Lucas **ROBERTONE** (Arg)	(26) 18.03.97
6	Dion **LOPY** (Sen)	(21) 02.02.02
8	Arnau **PUIGMAL**	(22) 10.01.01
11	Gonzalo **MELERO**	(29) 02.01.94
19	Sergio **ARRIBAS**	(22) 30.09.01
26	Martin **SVIDERSKY** (Svk)	(21) 04.10.02

FORWARDS

7	Largie **RAMAZANI** (Bel)	(22) 27.02.01
9	Luis **SUAREZ** (Col)	(25) 02.12.97
10	Adrian **EMBARBA**	(31) 07.05.92
12	Leo **BAPTISTAO** (Bra)	(31) 26.08.92
14	**LAZARO** (Bra)	(21) 12.03.02
23	Ibrahima **KONE** (Mli)	(24) 16.06.99
29	Marko **MILOVANOVIC** (Srb)	(20) 04.08.03
34	Marciano **SANCA** (Gnb)	(19) 03.04.04

COACH

	Gaizka **GARITANO**	(48) 09.07.75

ATHLETIC CLUB

GOALKEEPERS

1	Unai **SIMON**	(26) 11.06.97
13	Julen **AGIRREZABALA**	(22) 26.12.00

DEFENDERS

3	Daniel **VIVIAN**	(24) 05.07.99
4	Aitor **PAREDES**	(23) 29.04.00
5	**YERAY**	(28) 24.01.95
15	Inigo **LEKUE**	(30) 04.05.93
17	**YURI** Berchiche	(33) 10.02.90
18	Oscar **DE MARCOS**	(34) 14.04.89
19	**IMANOL**	(23) 08.06.00
27	Unai **EGILUZ**	(21) 19.03.02

MIDFIELDERS

6	Mikel **VESGA**	(30) 08.04.93
8	Oihan **SANCET**	(23) 25.04.00
14	Dani **GARCIA**	(33) 24.05.90
16	Inigo **RUIZ DE GALARRETA**	(30) 06.08.93
21	Ander **HERRERA**	(34) 14.08.89
23	Peru **NOLASKOAIN**	(25) 25.10.98
24	Benat **PRADOS**	(22) 08.02.01
30	Unai **GOMEZ**	(20) 25.05.03

FORWARDS

7	Alex **BERENGUER**	(28) 04.07.95
9	Inaki **WILLIAMS** (Gha)	(29) 15.06.94
10	Iker **MUNIAIN**	(30) 19.12.92
11	Nico **WILLIAMS**	(21) 12.07.02
12	Gorka **GURUZETA**	(27) 12.09.96
20	Asier **VILLALIBRE**	(26) 30.09.97
22	Raul **GARCIA**	(37) 11.07.86
29	Malcom **ADU ARES**	(22) 12.10.01

COACH

	Ernesto **VALVERDE**	(59) 09.02.64

ATLETICO MADRID

GOALKEEPERS

1	Ivo **GRBIC** (Cro)	(27) 18.01.96
13	Jan **OBLAK** (Svn)	(30) 07.01.93
31	Antonio **GOMIS**	(20) 20.05.03
51	Sergio **MESTRE**	(18) 13.02.05

DEFENDERS

2	Jose Maria **GIMENEZ** (Uru)	(28) 20.01.95
3	Cesar **AZPILICUETA**	(34) 28.08.89
4	Caglar **SOYUNCU** (Tur)	(27) 23.05.96
15	Stefan **SAVIC** (Mne)	(32) 08.01.91
16	Nahuel **MOLINA** (Arg)	(25) 06.04.98
17	Javi **GALAN**	(28) 19.11.94
22	Mario **HERMOSO**	(28) 18.06.95
23	**REINILDO** (Moz)	(29) 21.01.94
27	Ilias **KOSTIS** (Gre)	(20) 27.02.03
28	Marco **MORENO**	(22) 20.02.01
29	Javier **BONAR**	(18) 03.06.05
48	Adrian **CORRAL**	(20) 05.01.03

MIDFIELDERS

5	Rodrigo **DE PAUL** (Arg)	(29) 24.05.94
6	**KOKE**	(31) 08.01.92
8	**SAUL**	(28) 21.11.94
11	Thomas **LEMAR** (Fra)	(27) 12.11.95
14	Marcos **LLORENTE**	(28) 30.01.95
20	Axel **WITSEL** (Bel)	(34) 12.01.89
24	Pablo **BARRIOS**	(20) 15.06.03
26	Aitor **GISMERA**	(19) 21.02.04
36	Alex **CALATRAVA**	(23) 22.06.00
40	**MINI**	(24) 13.01.99

FORWARDS

7	Antoine **GRIEZMANN** (Fra)	(32) 21.03.91
9	Memphis **DEPAY** (Ned)	(29) 13.02.94
10	Angel **CORREA** (Arg)	(28) 09.03.95
12	Samuel **LINO** (Bra)	(23) 23.12.99
19	Alvaro **MORATA**	(31) 23.10.92
25	Rodrigo **RIQUELME**	(23) 02.04.00
30	Salim **EL JEBARI** (Mar)	(19) 05.02.04
32	**ADRIAN**	(19) 19.06.04

COACH

	Diego **SIMEONE** (Arg)	(53) 03.10.68

BARCELONA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Marc-Andre ter **STEGEN** (Ger)	(31) 30.04.92
13	Inaki **PENA**	(24) 02.03.99
26	Ander **ASTRALAGA**	(19) 03.03.04
31	Diego **KOCHEN** (USA)	(17) 19.03.06

DEFENDERS

2	Joao **CANCELO** (Por)	(29) 27.05.94
3	Alejandro **BALDE**	(20) 18.10.03
4	Ronald **ARAUJO** (Uru)	(24) 07.03.99
5	Inigo **MARTINEZ**	(32) 17.05.91
15	Andreas **CHRISTENSEN** (Den)	(27) 10.04.96
17	Marcos **ALONSO**	(32) 28.12.90
20	Sergi **ROBERTO**	(31) 07.02.92
23	Jules **KOUNDE** (Fra)	(24) 12.11.98
33	Pau **CUBARSI**	(16) 22.01.07

MIDFIELDERS

6	**GAVI**	(19) 05.08.04
8	**PEDRI**	(20) 25.11.02
18	Oriol **ROMEU**	(32) 24.09.91
21	Frenkie **DE JONG** (Ned)	(26) 12.05.97
22	Ilkay **GUNDOGAN** (Ger)	(33) 24.10.90
30	Marc **CASADO**	(20) 14.09.03
35	Unai **HERNANDEZ**	(18) 14.12.04

FORWARDS

7	Ferran **TORRES**	(23) 29.02.00
9	Robert **LEWANDOWSKI** (Pol)	(35) 21.08.88
11	**RAPHINHA** (Bra)	(26) 14.12.96
14	Joao **FELIX** (Por)	(23) 10.11.99
27	Lamine **YAMAL**	(16) 13.07.07
29	Angel **ALARCON**	(19) 15.05.04
32	Fermin **LOPEZ**	(20) 11.05.03
38	Marc **GUIU**	(17) 04.01.06

COACH

	XAVI	(43) 25.01.80

CADIZ

GOALKEEPERS

1	**CONAN** Ledesma (Arg)	(30) 13.02.93
13	David **GIL**	(29) 11.01.94
34	**NANDO**	(19) 03.11.03

DEFENDERS

2	Joseba **ZALDUA**	(31) 24.06.92
3	**FALI**	(30) 12.08.93
5	Victor **CHUST**	(23) 05.03.00
14	Momo **MBAYE** (Sen)	(25) 28.06.98
15	Javi **HERNANDEZ**	(25) 02.05.98
20	**IZA**	(30) 23.04.93
22	Jorge **MERE**	(26) 17.04.97
23	Luis **HERNANDEZ**	(34) 14.04.89
33	**LUCAS PIRES** (Bra)	(22) 24.03.01
35	**KIKIN**	(20) 20.01.03

MIDFIELDERS

4	Ruben **ALCARAZ**	(32) 01.05.91
6	Jose **MARI**	(35) 06.12.87
8	**ALEX**	(31) 15.10.92
12	Rominigue **KOUAME** (Mli)	(26) 17.12.96
17	Gonzalo **ESCALANTE** (Arg)	(30) 27.03.93
24	**FEDE**	(26) 16.03.97
27	Robert **NAVARRO**	(21) 12.04.02
	Martin **CALDERON**	(24) 01.03.99

FORWARDS

7	Ruben **SOBRINO**	(31) 01.06.92
9	Alvaro **NEGREDO**	(38) 20.08.85
10	Brian **OCAMPO** (Uru)	(24) 25.06.99
11	Ivan **ALEJO**	(28) 10.02.95
16	Chris **RAMOS**	(26) 16.01.97
18	Darwin **MACHIS** (Ven)	(30) 07.02.93
19	Sergi **GUARDIOLA**	(32) 29.05.91
21	Roger **MARTI**	(32) 03.01.91
25	Maxi **GOMEZ** (Uru)	(27) 14.08.96

COACH

	SERGIO	(46) 10.11.76

CELTA VIGO

GOALKEEPERS

1	Agustin **MARCHESIN** (Arg)	(35) 16.03.88
13	Ivan **VILLAR**	(26) 09.07.97
25	Vicente **GUAITA**	(36) 10.01.87
27	Ruly **GARCIA**	(23) 27.01.00

DEFENDERS

2	Carl **STARFELT** (Swe)	(28) 01.06.95
3	Oscar **MINGUEZA**	(24) 13.05.99
4	Unai **NUNEZ**	(26) 30.01.97
15	Joseph **AIDOO** (Gha)	(28) 29.09.95
20	Kevin **VAZQUEZ**	(30) 23.03.93
21	Mihailo **RISTIC** (Srb)	(27) 31.10.95
23	Manu **SANCHEZ**	(23) 24.08.00
28	Carlos **DOMINGUEZ**	(22) 11.02.01
33	Martin **CONDE**	(20) 25.03.03

MIDFIELDERS

5	Renato **TAPIA** (Per)	(28) 28.07.95
6	Carlos **DOTOR**	(22) 15.03.01
8	Fran **BELTRAN**	(24) 03.02.99
11	Franco **CERVI** (Arg)	(29) 26.05.94
14	Luca **DE LA TORRE** (USA)	(25) 23.05.98
19	Williot **SWEDBERG** (Swe)	(19) 01.02.04
30	Hugo **SOTELO**	(19) 19.12.03

FORWARDS

7	Carles **PEREZ**	(25) 16.02.98
10	Iago **ASPAS**	(36) 01.08.87
12	Tasos **DOUVIKAS** (Gre)	(24) 02.08.99
17	Jonathan **BAMBA** (Civ)	(27) 26.03.96
18	Jorgen Strand **LARSEN** (Nor)	(23) 06.02.00
29	Miguel **RODRIGUEZ**	(20) 29.04.03

COACH

	Rafa **BENITEZ**	(63) 16.04.60

GETAFE

GOALKEEPERS

1	Daniel **FUZATO** (Bra)	(26) 04.07.97
13	David **SORIA**	(30) 04.04.93
35	Jorge **BENITO**	(17) 01.01.06

DEFENDERS

2	**DJENE** (Tog)	(31) 31.12.91
3	Fabrizio **ANGILERI** (Arg)	(29) 15.03.94
4	Gaston **ALVAREZ** (Uru)	(23) 24.03.00
6	Domingos **DUARTE** (Por)	(28) 10.03.95
15	Omar **ALDERETE** (Par)	(26) 26.12.96
16	Diego **RICO**	(30) 23.02.93
18	Jose Angel **CARMONA**	(21) 29.01.02
21	Juan **IGLESIAS**	(25) 03.07.98
22	Damian **SUAREZ** (Uru)	(35) 27.04.88
23	Stefan **MITROVIC** (Srb)	(33) 22.05.90
27	Gorka **RIVERA**	(19) 01.08.04

MIDFIELDERS

5	Luis **MILLA**	(29) 07.10.94
8	Mauro **ARAMBARRI** (Uru)	(28) 30.09.95
9	**OSCAR**	(25) 28.06.98
11	Carles **ALENA**	(25) 05.01.98
20	Nemanja **MAKSIMOVIC** (Srb)	(28) 26.01.95
26	John **PATRICK** (Irl)	(20) 24.09.03
28	Santi **GARCIA**	(22) 29.08.01

FORWARDS

7	Jaime **MATA**	(35) 24.10.88
10	Enes **UNAL** (Tur)	(26) 10.05.97
12	Mason **GREENWOOD** (Eng)	(22) 01.10.01
14	Juanmi **LATASA**	(22) 23.03.01
17	Choco **LOZANO** (Hon)	(30) 25.04.93
19	Borja **MAYORAL**	(26) 05.04.97

COACH

	Jose **BORDALAS**	(59) 05.03.64

GIRONA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Juan **CARLOS**	(35) 20.01.88
13	Paulo **GAZZANIGA** (Arg)	(31) 02.01.92
26	Toni **FUIDIAS**	(22) 15.04.01

DEFENDERS

2	**BERNARDO** Espinosa (Col)	(34) 11.07.89
3	Miguel **GUTIERREZ**	(22) 27.07.01
4	**ARNAU**	(20) 25.04.03
5	David **LOPEZ**	(34) 09.10.89
11	**VALERY**	(23) 23.11.99
15	**JUANPE**	(32) 30.04.91
17	Daley **BLIND** (Ned)	(33) 09.03.90
20	Yan **COUTO** (Bra)	(21) 03.06.02
25	Eric **GARCIA**	(22) 09.01.01
	Eric **MONJONELL**	(21) 06.12.01

MIDFIELDERS

6	Ibrahima **KEBE** (Mli)	(23) 01.08.00
10	Borja **GARCIA**	(32) 02.11.90
14	Aleix **GARCIA**	(26) 28.06.97
18	Pablo **TORRE**	(20) 03.04.03
19	Toni **VILLA**	(28) 07.01.95
21	Yangel **HERRERA** (Ven)	(25) 07.01.98
22	Jhon **SOLIS** (Col)	(19) 03.10.04
23	Ivan **MARTIN**	(24) 14.02.99
28	**SELVI**	(18) 29.01.05
30	Iker **ALMENA**	(19) 04.05.04

FORWARDS

7	Cristhian **STUANI** (Uru)	(37) 12.10.86
8	Viktor **TSYGANKOV** (Ukr)	(25) 15.11.97
9	Artem **DOVBYK** (Ukr)	(26) 21.06.97
16	**SAVIO** (Bra)	(19) 10.04.04
24	**PORTU**	(31) 21.05.92
31	Jastin **GARCIA**	(19) 15.01.04

COACH

	MICHEL	(47) 30.10.75

GRANADA

GOALKEEPERS

1	**RAUL**	(35) 13.03.88
13	Andre **FERREIRA** (Por)	(27) 29.05.96
31	Adri **LOPEZ**	(24) 09.01.99

DEFENDERS

3	Wilson **MANAFA** (Por)	(29) 23.07.94
4	Miguel **RUBIO**	(25) 11.03.98
5	Jesus **VALLEJO**	(26) 05.01.97
12	Ricard **SANCHEZ**	(23) 22.02.00
14	Ignasi **MIQUEL**	(31) 28.09.92
15	Carlos **NEVA**	(27) 12.06.96
16	Victor **DIAZ**	(35) 12.06.88
28	Raul **TORRENTE**	(22) 11.09.01
29	Raul **CASTRO**	(22) 01.02.01
32	Miki **BOSCH**	(22) 09.06.01
33	Alvaro **FERNANDEZ**	(20) 23.03.03

MIDFIELDERS

18	Njegos **PETROVIC** (Srb)	(24) 18.07.99
20	Sergio **RUIZ**	(28) 16.12.94
21	Oscar **MELENDO**	(26) 23.08.97
22	Alberto **PEREA**	(32) 19.12.90
23	Gerard **GUMBAU**	(28) 18.12.94
24	Gonzalo **VILLAR**	(25) 23.03.98
27	Mario **GONZALEZ**	(19) 05.02.04

FORWARDS

7	Lucas **BOYE** (Arg)	(27) 28.02.96
9	Jose **CALLEJON**	(36) 11.02.87
10	Antonio **PUERTAS**	(31) 21.02.92
11	Myrto **UZUNI** (Alb)	(28) 31.05.95
17	Shon **WEISSMAN** (Isr)	(27) 14.02.96
19	Famara **DIEDHIOU** (Sen)	(30) 15.12.92
26	Bryan **ZARAGOZA**	(22) 25.04.01

COACH

	Paco **LOPEZ**	(56) 19.09.67

LAS PALMAS

GOALKEEPERS

1	**AARON**	(28) 27.09.95
13	Alvaro **VALLES**	(26) 25.07.97
35	Alex **GONZALEZ**	(21) 08.08.02

DEFENDERS

3	Sergi **CARDONA**	(24) 08.07.99
4	Alex **SUAREZ**	(30) 18.03.93
6	Eric **CURBELO**	(29) 14.01.94
14	Alvaro **LEMOS**	(30) 30.03.93
15	**MIKA**	(22) 01.07.01
18	Daley **SINKGRAVEN** (Ned)	(28) 04.07.95
23	Saul **COCO** (Eqg)	(24) 09.02.99
28	Julian **ARAUJO** (Mex)	(22) 13.08.01
31	**JUANMA**	(19) 13.05.04

MIDFIELDERS

5	Javi **MUNOZ**	(28) 28.02.95
8	Maximo **PERRONE** (Arg)	(20) 07.01.03
10	Alberto **MOLEIRO**	(20) 30.09.03
12	Enzo **LOIODICE** (Fra)	(22) 27.11.00
20	Kirian **RODRIGUEZ**	(27) 05.03.96
21	Jonathan **VIERA**	(34) 21.10.89
22	Omenuke **MFULU** (Cod)	(29) 20.03.94
29	Inaki **GONZALEZ**	(19) 27.07.04
	FABIO	(26) 12.02.97

FORWARDS

2	**MARVIN**	(23) 03.07.00
7	Cristian **HERRERA**	(32) 23.03.91
9	**SANDRO**	(28) 09.07.95
11	**BENITO**	(28) 11.07.95
16	Sory **KABA** (Gui)	(28) 28.07.95
17	**MUNIR** (Mar)	(28) 01.09.95
19	Marc **CARDONA**	(28) 08.07.95
24	**PEJINO**	(27) 29.07.96

COACH

Garcia **PIMIENTA**	(49) 03.08.74

MALLORCA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Predrag **RAJKOVIC** (Srb)	(27) 31.10.95
13	Dominik **GREIF** (Svk)	(26) 06.04.97
25	**PICHU**	(39) 27.05.84

DEFENDERS

2	Matija **NASTASIC** (Srb)	(30) 28.03.93
3	Toni **LATO**	(25) 21.11.97
4	Siebe Van Der **HEYDEN** (Bel)	(25) 30.05.98
6	Jose Manuel **COPETE**	(24) 10.10.99
11	Jaume **COSTA**	(35) 18.03.88
15	Pablo **MAFFEO**	(26) 12.07.97
20	Giovanni **GONZALEZ** (Uru)	(29) 20.09.94
21	Antonio **RAILLO**	(32) 08.10.91
24	Martin **VALJENT** (Svk)	(27) 11.12.95
27	David **LOPEZ**	(20) 03.02.03

MIDFIELDERS

5	Omar **MASCARELL**	(30) 02.02.93
8	Manu **MORLANES**	(24) 12.01.99
10	Sergi **DARDER**	(29) 22.12.93
12	**SAMU** (Por)	(22) 27.11.00
14	Dani **RODRIGUEZ**	(35) 06.06.88
18	Antonio **SANCHEZ**	(26) 22.04.97
26	Ruben **QUINTANILLA**	(21) 03.04.02
29	**MIGUELITO**	(22) 12.01.01
33	Daniel **LUNA** (Col)	(20) 07.05.03

FORWARDS

7	Vedat **MURIQI** (Kos)	(29) 24.04.94
9	**ABDON**	(30) 07.12.92
17	Cyle **LARIN** (Can)	(28) 17.04.95
19	Javier **LLABRES**	(21) 11.09.02
23	Amath **NDIAYE** (Sen)	(27) 16.07.96

COACH

Javier **AGUIRRE** (Mex)	(64) 01.12.58

OSASUNA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Sergio **HERRERA**	(30) 05.06.93
13	Aitor **FERNANDEZ**	(32) 03.05.91
31	Pablo **VALENCIA**	(22) 16.03.01
32	Dimitrios **STAMATAKIS** (Gre)	(20) 23.04.03

DEFENDERS

2	Nacho **VIDAL**	(28) 24.01.95
3	Juan **CRUZ**	(31) 28.07.92
4	Unai **GARCIA**	(31) 03.02.92
5	David **GARCIA**	(29) 14.02.94
12	Jesus **ARESO**	(24) 02.07.99
15	Ruben **PENA**	(32) 18.07.91
22	Johan **MOJICA** (Col)	(31) 21.08.92
24	Alejandro **CATENA**	(28) 28.10.94
28	Jorge **HERRANDO**	(22) 28.02.01

MIDFIELDERS

6	Lucas **TORRO**	(29) 19.07.94
7	Jon **MONCAYOLA**	(25) 13.05.98
8	Darko **BRASANAC** (Srb)	(31) 12.02.92
10	Aimar **OROZ**	(21) 27.11.01
14	Ruben **GARCIA**	(30) 14.07.93
16	Moi **GOMEZ**	(29) 23.06.94
19	Pablo **IBANEZ**	(25) 20.09.98
20	Jose **ARNAIZ**	(28) 15.04.95
34	Iker **MUNOZ**	(20) 05.11.02

FORWARDS

9	Chimy **AVILA** (Arg)	(29) 06.02.94
11	Kike **BARJA**	(26) 01.04.97
17	Ante **BUDIMIR** (Cro)	(32) 22.07.91
23	Raul **GARCIA**	(22) 03.11.00

COACH

Jagoba **ARRASATE**	(45) 22.04.78

RAYO VALLECANO

GOALKEEPERS

1	Stole **DIMITRIEVSKI** (Mkd)	(29) 25.12.93
13	Dani **CARDENAS**	(26) 28.03.97

DEFENDERS

2	Andrei **RATIU** (Rou)	(25) 20.06.98
3	Pep **CHAVARRIA**	(25) 10.04.98
4	Martin **PASCUAL**	(24) 04.08.99
5	**ARIDANE**	(34) 23.03.89
12	Alfonso **ESPINO** (Uru)	(31) 05.01.92
16	Abdul **MUMIN** (Gha)	(25) 06.06.98
20	Ivan **BALLIU** (Alb)	(31) 01.01.92
24	Florian **LEJEUNE** (Fra)	(32) 20.05.91
29	Diego **MENDEZ**	(20) 29.08.03

MIDFIELDERS

6	Jose Angel **POZO**	(27) 15.03.96
11	Randy **NTEKA** (Fra)	(25) 06.12.97
14	Kike **PEREZ**	(26) 14.02.97
17	Unai **LOPEZ**	(27) 30.10.95
18	Alvaro **GARCIA**	(31) 27.10.92
21	Pathe **CISS** (Sen)	(29) 16.03.94
23	**OSCAR**	(29) 20.08.94

FORWARDS

7	Isi **PALAZON**	(28) 27.12.94
8	Oscar **TREJO** (Arg)	(35) 26.04.88
9	Radamel **FALCAO** (Col)	(37) 10.02.86
10	**BEBE** (Cpv)	(33) 12.07.90
19	Jorge **DE FRUTOS**	(26) 20.02.97
22	Raul **DE TOMAS**	(29) 17.10.94
34	Sergio **CAMELLO**	(22) 10.02.01

COACH

FRANCISCO	(45) 17.06.78

REAL BETIS

GOALKEEPERS

1	Claudio **BRAVO** (Chi)	(40) 13.04.83
13	Rui **SILVA** (Por)	(29) 07.02.94
30	Fran **VIEITES**	(24) 07.05.99
31	Guilherme **FERNANDES** (Por)	(22) 28.03.01

DEFENDERS

2	Hector **BELLERIN**	(28) 19.03.95
3	Juan **MIRANDA**	(23) 19.01.00
6	German **PEZZELLA** (Arg)	(32) 27.06.91
15	Marc **BARTRA**	(32) 15.01.91
20	**ABNER VINICIUS** (Bra)	(23) 27.05.00
23	Youssouf **SABALY** (Sen)	(30) 05.03.93
28	Chadi **RIAD** (Mar)	(20) 17.06.03
34	Ricardo **VISUS**	(22) 24.04.01
42	Pablo **BUSTO**	(18) 15.09.05

MIDFIELDERS

5	Guido **RODRIGUEZ** (Arg)	(29) 12.04.94
8	Nabil **FEKIR** (Fra)	(30) 18.07.93
14	William **CARVALHO** (Por)	(31) 07.04.92
17	**RODRI**	(23) 16.05.00
18	Andres **GUARDADO** (Mex)	(37) 28.09.86
21	Marc **ROCA**	(26) 26.11.96
22	**ISCO**	(31) 21.04.92
27	Sergi **ALTIMIRA**	(22) 25.08.01
37	Dani **PEREZ**	(18) 26.07.05
38	Assane **DIAO**	(18) 07.09.05
40	Quique **FERNANDEZ**	(20) 16.09.03

FORWARDS

7	Abde **EZZALZOULI** (Mar)	(21) 17.12.01
9	Borja **IGLESIAS**	(30) 17.01.93
10	Ayoze **PEREZ**	(30) 29.07.93
11	**LUIZ HENRIQUE** (Bra)	(22) 02.01.01
12	**WILLIAN JOSE** (Bra)	(31) 23.11.91
16	Juan **CRUZ**	(23) 25.04.00
24	Aitor **RUIBAL**	(27) 22.03.96

COACH

Manuel **PELLEGRINI** (Chi)	(70) 16.09.53

REAL MADRID

GOALKEEPERS

1	Thibaut **COURTOIS** (Bel)	(31) 11.05.92
13	Andriy **LUNIN** (Ukr)	(24) 11.02.99
25	**KEPA** Arrizabalaga	(29) 03.10.94
26	Diego **PINEIRO**	(19) 13.02.04
30	**FRAN**	(18) 24.06.05
31	Lucas **CANIZARES**	(21) 10.05.02

DEFENDERS

2	Dani **CARVAJAL**	(31) 11.01.92
3	**EDER MILITAO** (Bra)	(25) 18.01.98
4	David **ALABA** (Aut)	(31) 24.06.92
6	**NACHO**	(33) 18.01.90
17	Lucas **VAZQUEZ**	(32) 01.07.91
20	Fran **GARCIA**	(24) 14.08.99
22	Antonio **RUDIGER** (Ger)	(30) 03.03.93
23	Ferland **MENDY** (Fra)	(28) 08.06.95
34	Alvaro **CARRILLO**	(21) 06.04.02
36	**VINICIUS TOBIAS** (Bra)	(19) 23.02.04

MIDFIELDERS

5	Jude **BELLINGHAM** (Eng)	(20) 29.06.03
8	Toni **KROOS** (Ger)	(33) 04.01.90
10	Luka **MODRIC** (Cro)	(38) 09.09.85
12	Eduardo **CAMAVINGA** (Fra)	(20) 10.11.02
15	Federico **VALVERDE** (Uru)	(25) 22.07.98
18	Aurelien **TCHOUAMENI** (Fra)	(23) 27.01.00
19	Dani **CEBALLOS**	(27) 07.08.96
21	Brahim **DIAZ**	(24) 03.08.99
24	Arda **GULER** (Tur)	(18) 25.02.05
32	Nico **PAZ**	(19) 08.09.04
33	Gonzalo **GARCIA**	(19) 24.03.04

FORWARDS

7	**VINICIUS JUNIOR** (Bra)	(23) 12.07.00
11	**RODRYGO** (Bra)	(22) 09.01.01
14	**JOSELU**	(33) 27.03.90
39	Alvaro **RODRIGUEZ** (Uru)	(19) 14.07.04

COACH

Carlo **ANCELOTTI** (Ita)	(64) 10.06.59

REAL SOCIEDAD

GOALKEEPERS

1	Alex **REMIRO**	(28) 24.03.95
30	Gaizka **AYESA**	(22) 02.04.01
32	Unai **MARRERO**	(22) 09.10.01
37	Aitor **FRAGA**	(20) 09.03.03

DEFENDERS

2	Alvaro **ODRIOZOLA**	(27) 14.12.95
3	**AIHEN** Munoz	(26) 16.08.97
5	Igor **ZUBELDIA**	(26) 30.03.97
6	Aritz **ELUSTONDO**	(29) 28.03.94
17	Kieran **TIERNEY** (Sco)	(26) 05.06.97
18	Hamari **TRAORE** (Mli)	(31) 27.01.92
20	Jon **PACHECO**	(22) 08.01.01
24	Robin Le **NORMAND**	(26) 11.11.96
26	Urko **GONZALEZ**	(22) 20.03.01

MIDFIELDERS

4	Martin **ZUBIMENDI**	(24) 02.02.99
8	Mikel **MERINO**	(27) 22.06.96
12	Arsen **ZAKHARYAN** (Rus)	(20) 26.05.03
16	Jon Ander **OLASAGASTI**	(23) 16.08.00
22	Benat **TURRIENTES**	(21) 31.01.02
23	Brais **MENDEZ**	(26) 07.01.97
28	Jon **MAGUNAZELAIA**	(22) 13.07.01
29	Pablo **MARIN**	(20) 03.07.03

FORWARDS

7	Ander **BARRENETXEA**	(21) 27.12.01
9	Carlos **FERNANDEZ**	(27) 22.05.96
10	Mikel **OYARZABAL**	(26) 21.04.97
11	Mohamed **ALI-CHO** (Fra)	(19) 19.01.04
14	Takefusa **KUBO** (Jpn)	(22) 04.06.01
19	Umar **SADIQ** (Nga)	(26) 02.02.97
21	Andre **SILVA** (Por)	(27) 06.11.95

COACH

Imanol **ALGUACIL**	(52) 04.07.71

SEVILLA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Marko **DMITROVIC** (Srb)	(31) 24.01.92
13	Orjan **NYLAND** (Nor)	(33) 10.09.90
31	Alberto **FLORES**	(19) 10.11.03
33	Matias **ARBOL**	(21) 12.09.02

DEFENDERS

2	Federico **GATTONI** (Arg)	(24) 16.02.99
3	Adria **PEDROSA**	(25) 13.05.98
4	Sergio **RAMOS**	(37) 30.03.86
6	Nemanja **GUDELJ** (Srb)	(31) 16.11.91
14	Tanguy **NIANZOU** (Fra)	(21) 07.06.02
16	Jesus **NAVAS**	(37) 21.11.85
19	Marcos **ACUNA** (Arg)	(31) 28.10.91
22	Loic **BADE** (Fra)	(23) 11.04.00
23	**MARCAO** (Bra)	(27) 05.06.96
26	**JUANLU** Sanchez	(20) 15.08.03
27	Kike **SALAS**	(21) 23.04.02

MIDFIELDERS

8	Joan **JORDAN**	(29) 06.07.94
10	Ivan **RAKITIC** (Cro)	(35) 10.03.88
18	Djibril **SOW** (Sui)	(26) 06.02.97
20	**FERNANDO** (Bra)	(36) 25.07.87
21	Oliver **TORRES**	(28) 10.11.94
24	Boubakary **SOUMARE** (Fra)	(24) 27.02.99
25	Adnan **JANUZAJ** (Bel)	(28) 05.02.95
28	Manuel **BUENO**	(19) 27.07.04
45	Xavi **SINTES**	(22) 05.08.01

FORWARDS

5	Lucas **OCAMPOS** (Arg)	(29) 11.07.94
7	**SUSO**	(29) 19.11.93
9	Rafa **MIR**	(26) 18.06.97
11	Dodi **LUKEBAKIO** (Bel)	(26) 24.09.97
12	**MARIANO** (Dom)	(30) 01.08.93
15	Youssef **EN-NESYRI** (Mar)	(26) 01.06.97
17	Erik **LAMELA** (Arg)	(31) 04.03.92
	Isaac **ROMERO**	(23) 18.05.00

COACH

Diego **ALONSO** (Uru)	(48) 16.04.75

VALENCIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Jaume **DOMENECH**	(32) 05.11.90
13	Cristian **RIVERO**	(25) 21.03.98
25	Giorgi **MAMARDASHVILI** (Geo)	(23) 29.09.00

DEFENDERS

3	Cristhian **MOSQUERA**	(19) 27.06.04
4	Mouctar **DIAKHABY** (Gui)	(26) 19.12.96
5	**GABRIEL PAULISTA** (Bra)	(32) 26.11.90
12	Thierry **CORREIA** (Por)	(24) 09.03.99
14	Jose **GAYA**	(28) 25.05.95
15	Cenk **OZKACAR** (Tur)	(23) 06.10.00
20	Dimitri **FOULQUIER** (Glp)	(30) 23.03.93
21	Jesus **VAZQUEZ**	(20) 02.01.03
29	Cesar **TARREGA**	(21) 26.02.02
31	Ruben **IRANZO**	(20) 14.03.03
34	Yarek **GASIOROWSKI**	(18) 12.01.05

MIDFIELDERS

6	Hugo **GUILLAMON**	(23) 31.01.00
7	Sergi **CANOS**	(26) 02.02.97
8	Javi **GUERRA**	(20) 13.05.03
10	Andre **ALMEIDA** (Por)	(23) 30.05.00
18	**PEPELU**	(25) 11.08.98
19	Selim **AMALLAH** (Mar)	(26) 15.11.96
23	Fran **PEREZ**	(21) 09.09.02
27	Pablo **GOZALBEZ**	(22) 30.04.01
32	Martin **TEJON**	(19) 12.04.04
35	**YELLU**	(19) 25.05.04

FORWARDS

9	Hugo **DURO**	(23) 10.11.99
16	Diego **LOPEZ**	(21) 13.05.02
17	Roman **YAREMCHUK** (Ukr)	(27) 27.11.95
22	Alberto **MARI**	(22) 11.07.01
30	Hugo **GONZALEZ**	(20) 07.02.03
36	Mario **DOMINGUEZ**	(19) 10.02.04

COACH

Ruben **BARAJA**	(48) 11.07.75

VILLARREAL

GOALKEEPERS

1	Pepe **REINA**	(41) 31.08.82
13	Filip **JORGENSEN** (Den)	(21) 16.04.02

DEFENDERS

2	Matteo **GABBIA** (Ita)	(24) 21.10.99
3	Raul **ALBIOL**	(38) 04.09.85
5	Jorge **CUENCA**	(23) 17.11.99
8	Juan **FOYTH** (Arg)	(25) 12.01.98
17	Kiko **FEMENIA**	(32) 02.02.91
18	Alberto **MORENO**	(31) 05.07.92
23	Aissa **MANDI** (Alg)	(32) 22.10.91
24	Alfonso **PEDRAZA**	(27) 09.04.96
26	Adria **ALTIMIRA**	(22) 28.03.01
37	Carlos **ROMERO**	(21) 29.10.01

MIDFIELDERS

4	Santi **COMESANA**	(27) 05.10.96
6	Etienne **CAPOUE** (Fra)	(35) 11.07.88
10	Dani **PAREJO**	(34) 16.04.89
14	Manu **TRIGUEROS**	(32) 17.10.91
19	Francis **COQUELIN** (Fra)	(32) 13.05.91
20	Ramon **TERRATS**	(23) 18.10.00
22	Denis **SUAREZ**	(29) 06.01.94

FORWARDS

7	Gerard **MORENO**	(31) 07.04.92
9	Ben **BRERETON DIAZ** (Chi)	(24) 18.04.99
11	Alexander **SORLOTH** (Nor)	(27) 05.12.95
15	Jose **MORALES**	(36) 23.07.87
16	Alex **BAENA**	(22) 20.07.01
21	**YEREMY**	(21) 20.10.02
27	Ilias **AKHOMACH**	(19) 16.04.04

COACH

PACHETA	(55) 23.03.68

(Ages as of 27.10.23)

ESM XI
EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	3
Alisson (Liverpool)	2
Marcin Bulka (Nice)	1
Lukas Hradecky (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Ivan Provedel (Lazio)	1
Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Barcelona)	1

DEFENDERS

Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	5
Joao Cancelo (Barcelona)	3
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	3
Gabriel (Arsenal)	2
Mario Hermoso (Atletico Madrid)	2
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Jean-Clair Todibo (Nice)	2
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	2
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	1
Andreas Christensen (Barcelona)	1
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	1
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	1
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	1
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	1
Achraf Hakimi (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	1
Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid)	1
Benjamin Pavard (Internazionale)	1
Cristian Romero (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	1
Savio (Girona)	1
Filippo Terracciano (Verona)	1
Keiran Trippier (Newcastle United)	1
Fikayo Tomori (Milan)	1
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	10
James Maddison (Tottenham Hotspur)	5
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	4
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Internazionale)	2
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Chris Fuhrich (Stuttgart)	1
Aleix Garcia (Girona)	1
Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta)	1
Takefusa Kubo (Real Sociedad)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1
Tijjani Reijnders (Milan)	1
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	1

FORWARDS

Serhou Guirassy (Stuttgart)	6
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	6
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	4
Victor Boniface (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	3
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	2
Son Heung-min (Tottenham Hotspur)	2
Julian Alvarez (Manchester City)	1
Santiago Gimenez (Feyenoord)	1
Mauro Icardi (Galatasaray)	1
Alvaro Morata (Atletico Madrid)	1
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *World Soccer* (England)

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Club Football

EUROPE

2023-24 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Sep 20 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 2 (Boey 86, Tete 88)
Copenhagen (Den) 2 (Elyounoussi 35, Goncalves 58)

Sep 20 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 4 (Sane 28, Gnabry 32, Kane 53 pen, Tel 90+2)
Manchester United (Eng) 3 (Hojlund 49, Casemiro 88, 90+5)

Oct 3 – Manchester
Manchester United (Eng) 2 (Hojlund 17, 67)
Galatasaray (Tur) 3 (Zaha 23, Akturkoglu 71, Icardi 81)

Oct 3 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen (Den) 1 (Lerager 56)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Musiala 67, Tel 83)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bayern Munich	2	2	0	0	6	4	6
Galatasaray	2	1	1	0	5	4	4
Copenhagen	2	0	1	1	3	4	1
Man Utd	2	0	0	2	5	7	0

Group B

Sep 20 – Seville
Sevilla (Spa) 1 (Ocampos 9)
Lens (Fra) 1 (Fulgini 24)

Sep 20 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 4 (Saka 8, Trossard 20, Gabriel Jesus 38, Odegaard 70)
PSV (Ned) 0

Oct 3 – Lens
Lens (Fra) 2 (Thomasson 25, Wahi 69)
Arsenal (Eng) 1 (Gabriel Jesus 14)

Oct 3 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 2 (De Jong 86 pen, Teze 90+5)
Sevilla (Spa) 2 (Gudelj 68, En-Nesyri 87)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lens	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Arsenal	2	1	0	1	5	2	3
Sevilla	2	0	2	0	3	3	2
PSV	2	0	1	1	2	6	1

Group C

Sep 20 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 1 (Bellingham 90+4)
Union Berlin (Ger) 0

Sep 20 – Braga
Braga (Por) 1 (Bruma 84)
Napoli (Ita) 2 (Di Lorenzo 45+1, Niakate 88 og)

Oct 3 – Berlin
Union Berlin (Ger) 2 (Becker 30, 37)
Braga (Por) 3 (Niakate 41, Bruma 51, Castro 90+4)

Oct 3 – Naples
Napoli (Ita) 2 (Ostigard 19, Zielinski 54 pen)
Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Vinicius Junior 27, Bellingham 34, Meret 78 og)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Madrid	2	2	0	0	4	2	6
Napoli	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Braga	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Union Berlin	2	0	0	2	2	4	0

Group D

Sep 20 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad (Spa) 1 (Mendez 4)
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (Martinez 87)

Sep 20 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 0
RB Salzburg (Aut) 2 (Simic 15 pen, Gloukh 51)

Oct 3 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 0
Real Sociedad (Spa) 2 (Oyarzabal 7, Mendez 27)

Oct 3 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (Thuram 62)
Benfica (Por) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Sociedad	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Inter	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
RB Salzburg	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Benfica	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Group E

Sep 19 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 2 (Stengs 45+2, Jahanbakhsh 76)
Celtic (Sco) 0

Sep 19 – Rome
Lazio (Ita) 1 (Provedel 90+5)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 1 (Barrios 29)

Oct 4 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 3 (Morata 12, 47, Griezmann 45+4)
Feyenoord (Ned) 2 (Hermoso 7 og, Hancko 34)

Oct 4 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 1 (Furuhashi 12)
Lazio (Ita) 2 (Vecino 29, Pedro 90+5)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Madrid	2	1	1	0	4	3	4
Lazio	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Feyenoord	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Celtic	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group F

Sep 19 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 0
Newcastle United (Eng) 0

Sep 19 – Paris
PSG (Fra) 2 (Mbappe 49 pen, Hakimi 58)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 0

Oct 4 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 0
Milan (Ita) 0

Oct 4 – Newcastle
Newcastle United (Eng) 4 (Almiron 17, Burn 39, Longstaff 50, Schar 90+1)
PSG (Fra) 1 (Hernandez 56)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Newcastle	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
PSG	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
Milan	2	0	2	0	0	0	2
B. Dortmund	2	0	1	1	0	3	1

Group G

Sep 19 – Bern
Young Boys (Sui) 1 (Elia 33)
RB Leipzig (Ger) 3 (Simakan 3, Schlager 73, Sesko 90+2)

Sep 19 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 3 (Alvarez 47, 60, Rodri 73)
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Bukari 45)

Oct 4 – Leipzig
RB Leipzig (Ger) 1 (Openda 48)
Manchester City (Eng) 3 (Foden 25, Alvarez 84, Doku 90+2)

Oct 4 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 2 (Ndiaye 35, Bukari 88)
Young Boys (Sui) 2 (Ugrinic 48, Itten 61 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Man City	2	2	0	0	6	2	6
RB Leipzig	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Young Boys	2	0	1	1	3	5	1
Red Star	2	0	1	1	3	5	1

Group H

Sep 19 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 5 (Joao Felix 11, 66, Lewandowski 19, Bataille 22 og, Gavi 54)
Antwerp (Bel) 0

Sep 19 – Hamburg
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 1 (Kelsy 13)
Porto (Por) 3 (Galeno 8, 15, Taremi 29)

Oct 4 – Antwerp
Antwerp (Bel) 2 (Muja 3, Balikwisha 33)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 3 (Sikan 48, 76, Rakitskyi 71)

Oct 4 – Porto
Porto (Por) 0
Barcelona (Spa) 1 (Torres 45+1)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Barcelona	2	2	0	0	6	0	6
Porto	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Shakhtar	2	1	0	1	4	5	3
Antwerp	2	0	0	2	2	8	0

**All tables correct at conclusion of matchday 2*

2023-24 UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE

Group A

Sep 21 – London
West Ham (Eng) 3 (Kudus 66, 70, Soucek 82)
TSC Backa Topola (Srb) 1 (Stanic 48)

Sep 21 – Piraeus
Olympiakos (Gre) 2 (El Kaabi 40, 75)
Freiburg (Ger) 3 (Sallai 9, Grifo 45+7 pen, Philipp 86)

Oct 5 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 1 (Sallai 49)
West Ham (Eng) 2 (Paqueta 8, Aguerd 66)

Oct 5 – Backa Topola
TSC Backa Topola (Srb) 2 (Djakovac 63, Pantovic 90)
Olympiakos (Gre) 2 (Masouras 16, Podence 57)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
West Ham	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
Freiburg	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Olympiakos	2	0	1	1	4	5	1
TSC	2	0	1	1	3	5	1

Group B

Sep 21 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 3 (Forbs 9, Berghuis 20, Taylor 52)
Marseille (Fra) 3 (Clauss 23, Aubameyang 38, 78)

Sep 21 – Brighton
Brighton (Eng) 2 (Joao Pedro 30 pen, 67 pen)
AEK Athens (Gre) 3 (Sidibe 11, Gacinovic 40, Ponce 84)

Oct 5 – Marseille
Marseille (Fra) 2 (Mbemba 19, Veretout 20)
Brighton (Eng) 2 (Gross 54, Joao Pedro 88 pen)

Oct 5 – Athens
AEK Athens (Gre) 1 (Vida 75)
Ajax (Ned) 1 (Bergwijn 30 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
AEK Athens	2	1	1	0	4	3	4
Marseille	2	0	2	0	5	5	2
Ajax	2	0	2	0	4	4	2
Brighton	2	0	1	1	4	5	1

Group C

Sep 21 – Prague
Sparta Prague (Cze) 3 (Krejci 20, 25, Vitik 67)
Aris Limassol (Cyp) 2 (Kokorin 11 pen, Babicka 90)

Sep 21 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 1 (Sima 68)
Real Betis (Spa) 0

Oct 5 – Seville
Real Betis (Spa) 2 (Diao 9, Isco 79)
Sparta Prague (Cze) 1 (Birmancevic 3)

Oct 5 – Limassol
Aris Limassol (Cyp) 2 (Moucketou-Moussounda 9, Babicka 59)
Rangers (Sco) 1 (Sima 70)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sparta Prague	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Aris Limassol	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Rangers	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Real Betis	2	1	0	1	2	2	3

Group D

Sep 21 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 2 (De Ketelaere 49, Ederson 66)
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 0

Sep 21 – Graz
Sturm Graz (Aut) 1 (Boving 58)
Sporting (Por) 2 (Gyokeres 76, Diomande 84)

Oct 5 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 1 (Gyokeres 76 pen)
Atalanta (Ita) 2 (Scalvini 33, Ruggeri 43)

Oct 5 – Sosnowiec
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 0
Sturm Graz (Aut) 1 (Boving 24)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atalanta	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Sporting	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Sturm Graz	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Rakow	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Group E

Sep 21 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 1 (Amoura 69)
Toulouse (Fra) 1 (Dallinga 45+3 pen)

Sep 21 – Linz
LASK (Aut) 1 (Flecker 14)
Liverpool (Eng) 3 (Nunez 56 pen, Diaz 63, Salah 88)

Oct 5 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 2 (Gravenberch 44, Jota 90+2)
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 0

Oct 5 – Toulouse
Toulouse (Fra) 1 (Suazo 31)
LASK (Aut) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liverpool	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Toulouse	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Union SG	2	0	1	1	1	3	1
LASK	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group F

Sep 21 – Rennes
Rennes (Fra) 3 (Blas 1, Truffert 31, Yildirim 55)
Maccabi Haifa (Isr) 0

Sep 21 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 2 (Ioannidis 38, Sporar 78)
Villarreal (Spa) 0

Oct 5 – Villarreal
Villarreal (Spa) 1 (Sorloth 36)
Rennes (Fra) 0

Oct 5 – Haifa
Maccabi Haifa (Isr) 0
Panathinaikos (Gre) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Panathinaikos	2	1	1	0	2	0	4
Villarreal	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Rennes	2	1	0	1	3	1	3
Maccabi Haifa	2	0	1	1	0	3	1

Group G

Sep 21 – Geneva
Servette (Sui) 0
Slavia Prague (Cze) 2 (Masopust 32, Ogbu 59)

Sep 21 – Tiraspol
Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 1 (Tovar 57)
Roma (Ita) 2 (Kiki 45+4 og, Lukaku 65)

Oct 5 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 4 (Lukaku 21, Belotti 46, 59, Pellegrini 52)
Servette (Sui) 0

Oct 5 – Prague
Slavia Prague (Cze) 6 (Chytil 4, 71, Ogbu 7, Garananga 39 og, Schranz 47, Doudera 58)
Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slavia Prague	2	2	0	0	8	0	6
Roma	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Servette	2	0	0	2	0	6	0
Sheriff	2	0	0	2	1	8	0

Group H

Sep 21 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 4 (Wirtz 10, Adli 16, Boniface 66, Hofmann 70)
BK Hacken (Swe) 0

Sep 21 – Baku
Qarabag (Aze) 1 (L. Andrade 56)
Molde (Nor) 0

Oct 5 – Molde
Molde (Nor) 1 (Breivik 87)
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Frimpong 14, Tella 18)

Oct 5 – Gothenburg
BK Hacken (Swe) 0
Qarabag (Aze) 1 (Juninho 70)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
B. Leverkusen	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Qarabag	2	2	0	0	2	0	6
Molde	2	0	0	2	1	3	0
BK Hacken	2	0	0	2	0	5	0

**All tables correct at conclusion of matchday 2*

2023-24 UEFA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Group A

Sep 20 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 2 (David 43 pen, Yazici 90+4)
Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 0

Sep 21 – Bratislava
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 2 (Weiss 54, Cavric 74)
Ki Klaksvik (Fro) 1 (Pavlovic 49)

Oct 5 – Ljubljana
Olimpija Ljubljana (Svn) 0
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1 (Cavric 55 pen)

Oct 5 – Torshavn
Ki Klaksvik (Fro) 0
Lille (Fra) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slovan Bratislava	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
Lille	2	1	1	0	2	0	4
KI Klaksvik	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Olimpija	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Group B

Sep 21 – Tel Aviv
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 3 (Macon 11, Zahavi 24, Biton 32)
Breidablik (Isl) 2 (Olsen 44, 55)

Sep 21 – Lublin
Zorya Luhansk (Ukr) 1 (Guerrero 70)
Gent (Bel) 1 (Cuypers 67)

Oct 5 – Reykjavik
Breidablik (Isl) 0
Zorya Luhansk (Ukr) 1 (Horbach 35)

Oct 5 – Gent
Gent (Bel) 2 (Tissoudali 39, 90+2 pen)
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Gent	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Zorya Luhansk	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Maccabi Tel Aviv	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
Breidablik	2	0	0	2	2	4	0

Group C

Sep 21 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Kalvach 73)
Ballkani (Kos) 0

Sep 21 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 5 (Petkovic 43 pen, 53 pen, Bulat 58, Marin 85, Halilovic 90+3)
Astana (Kaz) 1 (Hovhannisyan 78)

Oct 5 – Astana
Astana (Kaz) 1 (Tomasov 51)
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 2 (Chory 54, Kopic 57)

Oct 5 – Pristina
Ballkani (Kos) 2 (Kryeziu 44, Hamidi 83)
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Viktoria Plzen	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
Ballkani	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Dinamo Zagreb	2	1	0	1	5	3	3
Astana	2	0	0	2	2	7	0

Group D

Sep 21 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 1 (Vanaken 77)
Besiktas (Tur) 1 (Tosun 88)

Sep 21 – Zurich
Lugano (Sui) 0
Bode/Glimt (Nor) 0

Oct 5 – Bodo
Bode/Glimt (Nor) 0
Club Brugge (Bel) 1 (Vanaken 20)

Oct 5 – Istanbul
Besiktas (Tur) 2 (Aboubakar 38, 52)
Lugano (Sui) 3 (Aliseda 81, Vladi 86, Bailly 90 og)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lugano	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Club Brugge	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Besiktas	2	0	1	1	3	4	1
Bodo/Glimt	2	0	1	1	0	1	1

Group E

Sep 21 – Warsaw
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 3 (Wszolek 3, Muci 26, 51)
Aston Villa (Eng) 2 (Duran 6, Digne 38)

Sep 21 – Mostar
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 4 (Kozulj 48, 81, Corluka 68, Hrvanovic 71)
AZ (Ned) 3 (Van Brederode 10, Mijnans 32, D. De Wit 44)

Oct 5 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 1 (Pavlidis 52)
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 0

Oct 5 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 1 (McGinn 90+4)
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zrinjski Mostar	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
AZ	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Legia Warsaw	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Aston Villa	2	1	0	1	3	3	3

Group F

Sep 21 – Genk
Genk (Bel) 2 (Zeqiri 12, McKenzie 85)
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Ranieri 7, 23)

Sep 21 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 3 (Varga 44 pen, Owusu 45+7, Pesic 79)
Cukaricki (Srb) 1 (Ivanovic 26)

Oct 5 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Barak 66, Ikone 90+3)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 2 (Varga 25, Cisse 50)

Oct 5 – Leskovac
Cukaricki (Srb) 0
Genk (Bel) 2 (Heynen 10, Paintsil 21 pen)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ferencvaros	2	1	1	0	5	3	4
Genk	2	1	1	0	4	2	4
Fiorentina	2	0	2	0	4	4	2
Cukaricki	2	0	0	2	1	5	0

Group G

Sep 21 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 2 (Marmoush 11 pen, Koch 61)
Aberdeen (Sco) 1 (Polvara 22)

Sep 21 – Helsinki
HJK (Fin) 2 (Bande 35, Radulovic 90+9 pen)
PAOK (Gre) 3 (Koulierakis 55, Despodov 81, Brandon 90+4)

Oct 5 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 2 (Zivkovic 28, Koulierakis 90+2)
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 1 (Marmoush 68)

Oct 5 – Aberdeen
Aberdeen (Sco) 1 (Miovski 79)
HJK (Fin) 1 (Radulovic 59)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PAOK	2	2	0	0	5	3	6
Eintracht Frankfurt	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
HJK	2	0	1	1	3	4	1
Aberdeen	2	0	1	1	2	3	1

Group H

Sep 21 – Razgrad
Ludogorets (Bul) 4 (Yordanov 46, Piotrowski 50, 63, Rwan 90+4)
Spartak Trnava (Svk) 0

Sep 21 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 3 (Crespo 24, Batshuayi 30, Aziz 47)
Nordsjaelland (Den) 1 (Villadsen 55)

Oct 5 – Farum
Nordsjaelland (Den) 7 (Ingvartsen 2 pen, Osman 11, Tverskov 31, Nygren 32, 74, Son 68 og, Rasmussen 86)
Ludogorets (Bul) 1 (Verdon 9 pen)

Oct 5 – Trnava
Spartak Trnava (Svk) 1 (Ofori 88)
Fenerbahce (Tur) 2 (King 70, 81)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fenerbahce	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
Nordsjaelland	2	1	0	1	8	4	3
Ludogorets	2	1	0	1	5	7	3
Spartak Trnava	2	0	0	2	1	6	0

**All tables correct at conclusion of matchday 2*

SOUTH AMERICA

2023 COPA LIBERTADORES

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Sep 27 – Rio deJaneiro
Fluminense (Bra) 2 (Cano 10, 78)
Internacional (Bra) 2 (Mallo 45+5, Alan Patrick 64)

Sep 28 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 0
Palmeiras (Bra) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Oct 4 – Porto Alegre
Internacional (Bra) 1 (Mercado 10)
Fluminense (Bra) 2 (John Kennedy 81, Cano 87)
Fluminense win 4-3 on aggregate

Oct 5 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 1 (Piquerez 73)
Boca Juniors (Arg) 1 (Cavani 23)
1-1 on aggregate. Boca Juniors win 4-2 on pens

2023 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Sep 26 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Yuri Alberto 40)
Fortaleza (Bra) 1 (Ze Welison 22)

Sep 27 – Quito
LDU (Ecu) 3 (Guerrero 17, 42, Piovi 88)
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Oct 3 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 2 (Yago Pikachu 49, Tinga 55)
Corinthians (Bra) 0
Fortaleza win 3-1 on aggregate

Oct 4 – Banfield
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 0
LDU (Ecu) 0
LDU win 3-0 on aggregate

ASIA

2023-24 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Sep 19 – Tashkent
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 0
Al Ain (UAE) 3 (Laba 11, 66, Al Balochi 25)

Sep 19 – Ashgabat
Ahal (Tkm) 1 (Tagayew 51)
Al Fayha (KSA) 0

Oct 3 – Al Ain
Al Ain (UAE) 4 (Erik 4, Rahimi 32, Laba 41, Autonne 70)
Ahal (Tkm) 2 (Tagayew 58, Meredov 85)

Oct 3 – Riyadh
Al Fayha (KSA) 2 (Sabiri 10, 71)
Pakhtakor (Uzb) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ain	2	2	0	0	7	2	6
Ahal	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
Al Fayha	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Pakhtakor	2	0	0	2	0	5	0

Group B

Sep 18 – Amman
Al Faisaly (Jor) 0
Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb) 1 (Abdurakhmatov 90+7)

Sep 18 – Doha
Al Sadd (Qat) 0
Sharjah (UAE) 0

Oct 2 – Sharjah
Sharjah (UAE) 1 (Marega 20)
Al Faisaly (Jor) 0

Oct 2 – Qarshi
Nasaf Qarshi (Uzb) 3 (Nurulloyev 29, Amonov 46, 58)
Al Sadd (Qat) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nasaf Qarshi	2	2	0	0	4	1	6
Sharjah	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Al Sadd	2	0	1	1	1	3	1
Al Faisaly	2	0	0	2	0	2	0

Group C

Sep 18 –Jeddah
Al Ittihad (KSA) 3 (Camara 11, Romarinho 15, 42 pen)
AGMK (Uzb) 0

Sep 18 – Erbil
Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq) 2 (Jassim 26, 88)
Sepahan (Irn) 2 (Daneshgar 30, Ghorbani 67)

Oct 2 – Olmaliq
AGMK (Uzb) 1 (Hagh Nazari 81)
Al Quwa Al Jawiya (Irq) 2 (Elaibi 2, Tursunov 48 og)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Quwa Al Jawiya	2	1	1	0	4	3	4
Al Ittihad	1	1	0	0	3	0	3
Sepahan	1	0	1	0	2	2	1
AGMK	2	0	0	2	1	5	0

Group D

Sep 18 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 1 (Al Bulayhi 90+10)
Navbahor (Uzb) 1 (Tabatadze 52)

Sep 18 – Pune
Mumbai City (Ind) 0
Nassaji Mazandaran (Irn) 2 (Hosseini 34, Azadi 62)

Oct 3 – Namangan
Navbahor (Uzb) 3 (Iskanderov 52, Yakhshiboev 58, Abdumannopov 88)
Mumbai City (Ind) 0

Oct 3 – Tehran
Nassaji Mazandaran (Irn) 0
Al Hilal (KSA) 3 (Mitrovic 18, Neymar 58, Al Shehri 90+3)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Navbahor	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Nassaji Mazandaran	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Mumbai City	2	0	0	2	0	5	0

Group E

Sep 19 – Dushanbe
Istiklol (Tjk) 0
Al Duhail (Qat) 0

Sep 19 – Tehran
Persepolis (Irn) 0
Al Nassr (KSA) 2 (Esmaeilifar 62 og, Qassem 72)

Oct 2 – Riyadh
Al Nassr (KSA) 3 (Ronaldo 66, Talisca 72, 77)
Istiklol (Tjk) 1 (Sebai 44)

Oct 2 – Doha
Al Duhail (Qat) 0
Persepolis (Irn) 1 (Alishah 63)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Nassr	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Persepolis	2	1	0	1	1	2	3
Al Duhail	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
Istiklol	2	0	1	1	1	3	1

Group F

Sep 20 – Jeonju
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 2 (Hong Jeong-ho 6, Han Kyo-won 61)
Kitchee (Hkg) 1 (Mikael 56)

Sep 20 – Singapore
Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 1 (Diego Lopes 25)
Bangkok United (Tha) 2 (Everton 51, Thitiphan 62)

Oct 4 – Rangsit
Bangkok United (Tha) 3 (Poomchantuek 26, Ahn Hyeon-beom 58 og, Willen 82)
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 2 (Limwannasathian 19 og, Moon Seon-min 88)

Oct 4 – Hong Kong
Kitchee (Hkg) 1 (Jantscher 87)
Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 2 (Zivkovic 14, Lestienne 37)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bangkok Utd	2	2	0	0	5	3	6
Jeonbuk HM	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Lion City Sailors	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Kitchee	2	0	0	2	2	4	0

Group G

Sep 19 – Yokohama
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 2 (Nishimura 17, Miyaichi 43)
Incheon United (Kor) 4 (Ichimori 8 og, Gerso Fernandes 37, Hernandes 75, 79)

Sep 19 – Manila
Kaya–Iloilo (Phi) 1 (Gayoso 79)
Shandong Taishan (Chn) 3 (Moises 63, Pato 71, Crysan 90+5)

Oct 3 – Incheon
Incheon United (Kor) 4 (Mugosa 6, 19 pen, Hernandes 36, M'Poku 74)
Kaya–Iloilo (Phi) 0

Oct 3 – Jinan
Shandong Taishan (Chn) 0
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 1 (Mizunuma 37)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Incheon Utd	2	2	0	0	8	2	6
Yokohama FM	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
Shandong Taishan	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Kaya-Iloilo	2	0	0	2	1	7	0

Group H

Sep 20 – Buriram
Buriram United (Tha) 4 (Doumbouya 17, Causic 22 pen, 45, Hemviboon 57)
Zhejiang (Chn) 1 (Leonardo 45+8)

Sep 20 – Melbourne
Melbourne City (Aus) 0
Ventforet Kofu (Jpn) 0

Oct 4 – Huzhou
Zhejiang (Chn) 1 (Leonardo 19 pen)
Melbourne City (Aus) 2 (Behich 4, Caputo 17)

Oct 4 – Tokyo
Ventforet Kofu (Jpn) 1 (Hasegawa 90)
Buriram United (Tha) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Melbourne City	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Ventforet Kofu	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Buriram Utd	2	1	0	1	4	2	3
Zhejiang	2	0	0	2	2	6	0

Group I

Sep 19 – Ulsan
Ulsan Hyundai (Kor) 3 (Adam 28, 73, 78)
BG Pathum United (Tha) 1 (Stewart 41)

Sep 19 – Johor Bahru
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 0
Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) 1 (Marcinho 45)

Oct 3 – Kawasaki
Kawasaki Frontale (Jpn) 1 (Tachibanada 89)
Ulsan Hyundai (Kor) 0

Oct 3 – Pathum Thani
BG Pathum United (Tha) 2 (Victor 5 pen, 55)
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 4 (Hanapi 6, 78, Bergson 14, Muniz 53)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kawasaki Frontale	2	2	0	0	2	0	6
Johor Darul Ta'zim	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Ulsan Hyundai	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
BG Pathum Utd	2	0	0	2	3	7	0

Group J

Sep 20 – Wuhan
Wuhan Three Towns (Chn) 2 (Zhang Xiaobin 10, Davidson 62 pen)
Urawa Reds (Jpn) 2 (Linssen 55, Kante 90+4)

Sep 20 – Hanoi
Hanoi (Vie) 2 (Tagueu 53, 87)
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 4 (Le Tallec 30 og, Yun Min-ho 34, Kim In-sung 39, 49)

Oct 4 – Saitama
Urawa Reds (Jpn) 6 (Pham Tuan Hai 9 og, Scholz 19 pen, Takahashi 37, Sekine 65, Jose Kante 70, Panya 85)
Hanoi (Vie) 0

Oct 4 – Pohang
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 3 (Shin Kwang-hoon 13, Zeca 54, 90+3)
Wuhan Three Towns (Chn) 1 (Yakubu 10)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pohang Steelers	2	2	0	0	7	3	6
Urawa Reds	2	1	1	0	8	2	4
Wuhan Three Towns	2	0	1	1	3	5	1
Hanoi	2	0	0	2	2	10	0

**All tables correct at conclusion of matchday 2*

2023-24 AFC CUP

Group A

Sep 18: Al Ahed (Lbn) 2-1 Al Nahda (Oma); Jabal Al Mukaber (Ple) 1-0 Al Fotuwa (Syr)
Oct 2: Al Nahda (Oma) 4-0 Jabal Al Mukaber (Ple); Al Fotuwa (Syr) 1-0 Al Ahed (Lbn)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Nahda	2	1	0	1	5	2	3
Al Ahed	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Al Fotuwa	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Jabal Al Mukaber	2	1	0	1	1	4	3

Group B

Sep 19: Al Wehdat (Jor) 2-0 Al Ittihad (Syr); Al Kahrabaa (Irq) 0-0 Al Kuwait (Kuw)
Oct 3: Al Ittihad (Syr) 0-2 Al Kahrabaa (Irq); Al Kuwait (Kuw) 2-1 Al Wehdat (Jor)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Kahrabaa	2	1	1	0	2	0	4
Al Kuwait	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Al Wehdat	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Al Ittihad	2	0	0	2	0	4	0

Group C

Sep 18: Al Zawraa (Irq) 1-2 Al Arabi (Kuw); Nejmeh (Lbn) 0-2 Al Riffa (Bhr)
Oct 2: Al Arabi (Kuw) 0-0 Nejmeh (Lbn); Al Riffa (Bhr) 1-1 Al Zawraa (Irq)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Riffa	2	1	1	0	3	1	4
Al Arabi	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Al Zawraa	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Nejmeh	2	0	1	1	0	2	1

Group D

Sep 19: Odisha (Ind) 0-4 Mohun Bagan (Ind); Maziya (Mdv) 3-1 Bashundhara Kings (Ban)
Oct 2: Mohun Bagan (Ind) 2-1 Maziya (Mdv); Bashundhara Kings (Ban) 3-2 Odisha (Ind)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mohun Bagan	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Maziya	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Bashundhara Kings	2	1	0	1	4	5	3
Odisha	2	0	0	2	2	7	0

Group E

Sep 21: Ravshan Kulob (Tjk) 0-0 Merw Mary (Tkm); Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz) 3-0 Altyn Asyr (Tkm)
Oct 5: Merw Mary (Tkm) 1-1 Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz); Altyn Asyr (Tkm) 1-1 Ravshan Kulob (Tjk)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Abdysh-Ata Kant	2	1	1	0	4	1	4
Ravshan Kulob	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Merw Mary	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Altyn Asyr	2	0	1	1	1	4	1

Group F

Sep 21: DH Cebu (Phi) 0-3 Phnom Penh Crown (Cam); Shan United (Mya) 0-3 Macarthur (Aus)
Oct 5: Phnom Penh Crown (Cam) 4-0 Shan United (Mya); Macarthur (Aus) 8-2 DH Cebu (Phi)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Macarthur	2	2	0	0	11	2	6
Phnom Penh Crown	2	2	0	0	7	0	6
Shan United	2	0	0	2	0	7	0
DH Cebu	2	0	0	2	2	11	0

Group G

Sep 20: Terengganu (Mas) 1-0 Central Coast Mariners (Aus); Stallion Laguna (Phi) 2-5 Bali United (Idn)
Oct 4: Central Coast Mariners (Aus) 9-1 Stallion Laguna (Phi); Bali United (Idn) 1-1 Terengganu (Mas)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bali United	2	1	1	0	6	3	4
Terengganu	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Central Coast	2	1	0	1	9	2	3
Stallion Laguna	2	0	0	2	3	14	0

Group H

Sep 21: Haiphong (Vie) 3-0 PSM Makassar (Idn); Sabah (Mas) 3-1 Hougang United (Sgp)
Oct 5: PSM Makassar (Idn) 0-5 Sabah (Mas); Hougang United (Sgp) 2-1 Haiphong (Vie)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sabah	2	2	0	0	8	1	6
Haiphong	2	1	0	1	4	2	3
Hougang United	2	1	0	1	3	4	3
PSM Makassar	2	0	0	2	0	8	0

Group I

Sep 21: Chao Pak Kei (Mac) 0-1 Taichung Futuro (Tpe); Ulaanbaatar (Mng) 3-1 Taiwan Steel (Tpe)
Oct 5: Ulaanbaatar (Mng) 0-2 Taichung Futuro (Tpe); Taiwan Steel (Tpe) p-p Chao Pak Kei (Mac)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Taichung Futuro	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Ulaanbaatar	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Chao Pak Kei	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Taiwan Steel	1	0	0	1	1	3	0

**All tables correct at conclusion of matchday 2*

SINGAPORE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Albirex Niigata S (C)	24	20	2	2	86	20	62
Lion City Sailors	24	17	3	4	79	39	54
Tampines Rovers	24	14	6	4	47	32	48
Balestier Khalsa	24	12	0	12	60	71	36
Geylang International	24	10	3	11	41	52	33
Hougang United	24	9	2	13	37	57	29
DPMM	24	6	5	13	39	43	23
Tanjong Pagar	24	6	3	15	39	62	21
Young Lions	24	1	2	21	24	76	5

CONCACAF

2023 CARIBBEAN CUP

Group A

Sep 19-20: Cavalier (Jam) 3-0 Moca (Dom); AC Port of Spain (Tri) 2-3 Golden Lion (Mtq)
Sep 26-28: Moca (Dom) 3-0 Golden Lion (Mtq); AC Port of Spain (Tri) 1-1 Defence Force (Tri)
Oct 4: Golden Lion (Mtq) 2-5 Cavalier (Jam); Defence Force (Tri) 0-2 Moca (Dom)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cavalier (Q)	4	3	1	0	11	4	10
Moca (Q)	4	3	0	1	6	3	9
Defence Force	4	1	2	1	3	4	5
Golden Lion	4	1	0	3	5	11	3
AC Port of Spain	4	0	1	3	4	7	1

Group B

Sep 20-21: Atletico Pantoja (Dom) 1-1 Harbour View (Jam); Dunbeholden (Jam) 0-2 Robinhood (Sur)
Sep 27-28: Harbour View (Jam) 3-2 Robinhood (Sur); Dunbeholden (Jam) 2-1 Cibao (Dom)
Oct 5: Robinhood (Sur) 3-1 Atletico Pantoja (Dom); Cibao (Dom) 2-1 Harbour View (Jam)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Robinhood (Q)	4	3	0	1	8	4	9
Harbour View (Q)	4	2	1	1	6	5	7
Cibao	4	1	1	2	4	5	4
Dunbeholden	4	1	1	2	3	5	4
Atletico Pantoja	4	0	3	1	4	6	3

2023 CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Sep 26 – Tegucigalpa
Motagua (Hon) 1 (Auzmendi 35)
Independiente (Pan) 1 (Hurtado 80)

Sep 27 – Guatemala City
Comunicaciones (Gua) 0
Herediano (Crc) 0

Sep 27 – Esteli
Real Esteli (Nca) 1 (Hernandez 10)
Saprissa (Crc) 0

Sep 28 – Cartago
Cartagines (Crc) 1 (Hernandez 88)
Alajuelense (Crc) 3 (Campbell 55, Venegas 64, Suarez 67)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Oct 3 – Penonome
Independiente (Pan) 2 (Small 31, 45)
Motagua (Hon) 0
Independiente win 3-1 on aggregate

Oct 4 – Cartago
Herediano (Crc) 3 (Sayago 24 pen, 51, Faerron 90+3)
Comunicaciones (Gua) 2 (Corena 55, Gonzalez 76)
Herediano win 3-2 on aggregate

Oct 4 – SanJose
Saprissa (Crc) 2 (East 20, Sinclair 82)
Real Esteli (Nca) 2 (Escobar 51 og, Fletes 71)
Real Esteli win 3-2 on aggregate

Oct 5 – Alajuela
Alajuelense (Crc) 3 (A. Lopez 8, Suarez 35, Gondola 89)
Cartagines (Crc) 0
Alajuelense win 6-1 on aggregate

SAINT KITTS & NEVIS

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
St Paul's United*	22	12	7	3	45	21	43
Cayon*	22	12	6	4	42	20	42
Village Superstars*	22	12	5	5	58	23	41
Old Road Jets United*	22	12	3	7	42	20	39
Conaree United*	22	10	8	4	38	21	38
Newtown United*	22	9	9	4	35	27	36
St Peters	22	10	6	6	35	33	36
Bath United	22	8	6	8	33	37	30
Garden Hotspurs	22	4	8	10	22	31	20
Saddlers United	22	2	10	10	19	38	16
Security Forces United (R)	22	1	7	14	16	68	10
Sandy Point (R)	22	1	3	18	12	58	6

**Advance to the next stage*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Village Superstars*	5	2	3	0	9	6	9
St Paul's United*	5	2	2	1	9	6	8
Old Road Jets United	5	2	2	1	6	8	8
Cayon	5	2	1	2	5	5	7
Conaree United	5	1	3	1	8	7	6
Newtown United	5	0	1	4	4	9	1

**Advance to the next stage*

Final Stage

Sep 24: Village Superstars 1-1p St Paul's United
Sep 27: St Paul's United 1-3 Village Superstars
Sep 30: Village Superstars p0-0 St Paul's United

AFRICA

2023 CAF SUPER CUP

Sep 15 – Taif
Al Ahly (Egy) 0
USM Alger (Alg) 1 (Belaid 43 pen)
Al Ahly: El Shenawy – Hany, Rabia, Abdelmonem, Maaloul; Slim (Mohsen 64), Attia (Tau 64), Ashour (Magdy Afsha 79); Dieng, Kahraba (Ibrahim 85), El Shahat (Mohamed 79).
USM Alger: Benbot – Radouani, Belaid, Alilet, Lamara; Benzaza (Ben Khelifa 84), Chita (Embarek 67); Fettouhi (Kanu 67), Orebonye, Bousseliou (Konate 83); Belkacemi (Merili 79).

2023-24 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Second Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Sep 15: Bumauru (Bdi) 0-4 Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA)
Sep 16: Power Dynamos (Zam) 2-2 Simba (Tan); Etoile Sahel (Tun) 1-0 Royal Armed Forces (Mar); Real Bamako (Mli) 0-3 FC Nouadibou (Mtn); Al Merreikh (Sdn) 0-2 Young Africans (Tan)
Sep 17: Hafia (Gui) 1-1 Wydad Casablanca (Mar); AS Douanes (Bfa) 0-1 Esperance (Tun); Bo Rangers (Sle) 1-3 Chabab Belouizdad (Alg); Medeama (Gha) 3-1 Horoya (Gui); APR FC (Rwa) 0-0 Pyramids (Egy); UD Songo (Moz) 1-2 Petro Atletico (Ang); Big Bullets (Mwi) 0-1 TP Mazembe (Cod); Primero Agosto (Ang) 0-0 Al Hilal (Sdn); Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) 1-0 Orlando Pirates (RSA)
Sep 18: Al Ahly Benghazi (Lby) 0-0 ASEC Abidjan (Civ)
Sep 24: St George (Eth) 0-3 Al Ahly (Egy)

Second Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Sep 29: Al Ahly (Egy) 4-0 St George (Eth) (agg 7-0); Pyramids (Egy) 6-1 APR FC (Rwa) (agg 6-1); Orlando Pirates (RSA) 1-0 Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) (agg 1-1p)
Sep 30: Wydad Casablanca (Mar) 3-0 Hafia (Gui) (agg 4-1); Esperance (Tun) 0-0 AS Douanes (Bfa) (agg 1-0); Horoya (Gui) 2-1 Medeama (Gha) (agg 3-4); Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2-0 Bumauru (Bdi) (agg 6-0); Petro Atletico (Ang) 3-1 UD Songo (Moz) (agg 5-2); TP Mazembe (Cod) 4-0 Big Bullets (Mwi) (agg 5-0); Royal Armed Forces (Mar) 1-2 Etoile Sahel (Tun) (agg 1-3); Young Africans (Tan) 1-0 Al Merreikh (Sdn) (agg 3-0)
Oct 1: Simba (Tan) 1-1 Power Dynamos (Zam) (agg a3-3); ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 2-1 Al Ahly Benghazi (Lby) (agg 2-1); FC Nouadibou (Mtn) 1-1 Real Bamako (Mli) (agg 4-1); Al Hilal (Sdn) 2-1 Primero Agosto (Ang) (agg 2-1)
Oct 2: Chabab Belouizdad (Alg) 3-1 Bo Rangers (Sle) (agg 6-2)

2023-24 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Second Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Sep 15: SOAR (Gui) 1-2 Amadou Diallo (Civ); Dreams FC (Gha) 2-1 Kallon FC (Sle)
Sep 16: Bendel Insurance (Nga) 2-2 RS Berkane (Mar); Arta Solar 7 (Dji) 2-0 Zamalek (Egy); Sekhukhune United (RSA) 3-1 St Eloi Lupopo (Cod); Ferroviario Maputo (Moz) 1-0 Sagrada Esperanca (Ang); Gaborone United (Bot) 1-1 SuperSport United (RSA)
Sep 17: Etoile Filante (Bfa) 0-0 Rivers United (Nga); Singida Big Stars (Tan) 1-0 Future FC (Egy); Bahir Dar (Eth) 2-0 Club Africain (Tun); Abu Salim (Lby) 3-1 Kampala Capital City Authority (Uga); Maestro United (Zam) 1-2 Diables Noirs (Cog); Stade Malien (Mli) 2-0 Aigle Noir (Bdi); Al Mereikh Juba (Ssd) 0-0 Academica Lobito (Ang)
Sep 23: FUS Rabat (Mar) 1-1 USM Alger (Alg)
Sep 24: Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby) 1-1 Rayon Sport (Rwa)

Second Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Sep 29: RS Berkane (Mar) 1-0 Bendel Insurance (Nga) (agg 3-2); SuperSport United (RSA) 3-0 Gaborone United (Bot) (agg 4-1); Aigle Noir (Bdi) 3-1 Stade Malien (Mli) (agg 3-3a)
Sep 30: Zamalek (Egy) 4-1 Arta Solar 7 (Dji) (agg 4-3); Kampala Capital City Authority (Uga) 3-2 Abu Salim (Lby) (agg 4-5); Rayon Sport (Rwa) 1-1 Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby) (agg 2-2p); Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) 1-0 Ferroviario Maputo (Moz) (agg p1-1); Amadou Diallo (Civ) 0-2 SOAR (Gui) (agg 2-3); Kallon FC (Sle) 1-1 Dreams FC (Gha) (agg 2-3)
Oct 1: USM Alger (Alg) 0-0 FUS Rabat (Mar) (agg a1-1); Rivers United (Nga) 2-0 Etoile Filante (Bfa) (agg 2-0); Future FC (Egy) 4-1 Singida Big Stars (Tan) (agg 4-2); Club Africain (Tun) 3-0 Bahir Dar (Eth) (agg 3-2); St Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 1-1 Sekhukhune United (RSA) (agg 2-4); Diables Noirs (Cog) 2-0 Maestro United (Zam) (agg 4-1); Academica Lobito (Ang) 3-0 Al Mereikh Juba (Ssd) (agg 3-0)

OCEANIA

FIJI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lautoka (C)	18	12	4	2	50	21	40
Rewa	18	9	6	3	31	16	33
Suva	18	8	5	5	32	21	29
Labasa	18	7	7	4	17	11	28
Ba	18	6	7	5	21	18	25
Nadi	18	7	3	8	27	34	24
Tailevu Naitasiri	18	7	3	8	21	29	24
Navua	18	5	5	8	24	28	20
Nadroga (R)	18	4	1	13	18	46	13
Tavua (R)	18	1	7	10	21	38	10

Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

AFRICA Section

● *9 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Group A
Nov 16-18: Burkina Faso v Guinea-Bissau; Egypt v Djibouti, Ethiopia v Sierra Leone
Nov 19-21: Djibouti v Guinea-Bissau; Sierra Leone v Egypt; Ethiopia v Burkina Faso

Group B
Nov 16-18: DR Congo v Mauritania; Senegal v South Sudan; Sudan v Togo
Nov 19-21: South Sudan v Mauritania; Togo v Senegal; Sudan v DR Congo

Group C
Nov 16-18: South Africa v Benin; Nigeria v Lesotho; Rwanda v Zimbabwe
Nov 19-21: Lesotho v Benin; Zimbabwe v Nigeria; Rwanda v South Africa

Group D
Nov 16-18: Cape Verde v Angola; Cameroon v Mauritius; Eswatini v Libya
Nov 19-21: Mauritius v Angola; Libya v Cameroon; Eswatini v Cape Verde

Group E
Nov 16-18: Zambia v Congo; Morocco v Eritrea; Niger v Tanzania
Nov 19-21: Eritrea v Congo; Tanzania v Morocco; Niger v Zambia

Group F
Nov 16-18: Gabon v Kenya; Ivory Coast v Seychelles; Burundi v Gambia
Nov 19-21: Seychelles v Kenya; Gambia v Ivory Coast; Burundi v Gabon

Group G
Nov 16-18: Guinea v Uganda; Algeria v Somalia; Botswana v Mozambique
Nov 19-21: Somalia v Uganda; Mozambique v Algeria; Botswana v Guinea

Group H
Nov 16-18: Equatorial Guinea v Namibia; Tunisia v Sao Tome & Principe; Liberia v Malawi
Nov 19-21: Sao Tome & Principe v Namibia; Malawi v Tunisia; Liberia v Equatorial Guinea

Group I
Nov 16-18: Ghana v Madagascar; Mali v Chad; Comoros v Central African Republic
Nov 19-21: Chad v Madagascar; Central African Republic v Mali; Comoros v Ghana

EURO 2024 QUALIFIERS

Group A
Nov 16: Georgia v Scotland; Cyprus v Spain
Nov 19: Scotland v Norway; Spain v Georgia

Group B
Nov 18: France v Gibraltar; Netherlands v Republic of Ireland
Nov 21: Gibraltar v Netherlands; Greece v France

Group C
Nov 17: England v Malta; Italy v N. Macedonia
Nov 20: N. Macedonia v England; Ukraine v Italy

Group D
Nov 18: Armenia v Wales; Latvia v Croatia
Nov 21: Croatia v Armenia; Wales v Turkey

Group E
Nov 17: Moldova v Albania; Poland v Czech Rep
Nov 20: Albania v Faroe Isl; Czech Rep v Moldova

Group F
Nov 16: Azerbaijan v Sweden; Estonia v Austria
Nov 19: Belgium v Azerbaijan; Sweden v Estonia

Group G
Nov 16: Bulgaria v Hungary; Montenegro v Lithuania
Nov 19: Hungary v Montenegro; Serbia v Bulgaria

Group H
Nov 17: Kazakhstan v San Marino; Finland v Northern Ireland; Denmark v Slovenia
Nov 20: Northern Ireland v Denmark; San Marino v Finland; Slovenia v Kazakhstan

Group I
Nov 18: Belarus v Andorra; Israel v Romania; Switzerland v Kosovo
Nov 21: Andorra v Israel; Kosovo v Belarus; Romania v Switzerland

Group J
Nov 16: Liechtenstein v Portugal; Luxembourg v Bosnia & Herzegovina; Slovakia v Iceland
Nov 19: Bosnia & Herzegovina v Slovakia; Liechtenstein v Luxembourg; Portugal v Iceland

2023-24 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

League A

Quarter-Finals
**Seeded teams Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico and USA to be drawn against the Group A and Group B winners and runners-up, with the ties taking place on November 16-17 and November 20-21*

League B

Group A
Nov 16: Saint Kitts & Nevis v Saint Lucia; Sint Maarten v Guadeloupe
Nov 19: Guadeloupe v Saint Kitts & Nevis; Saint Lucia v Sint Maarten

Group B
Nov 17: Montserrat v Dominican Republic; Barbados v Nicaragua
Nov 20: Nicaragua v Dominican Republic; Montserrat v Barbados

Group C
Nov 17: Bermuda v Saint Vincent & Grenadines; Belize v French Guiana
Nov 20: French Guiana v Bermuda; Saint Vincent & Grenadines v Belize

Group D
Nov 18: Antigua & Barbuda v Puerto Rico; Bahamas v Guyana
Nov 21: Guyana v Antigua & Barbuda; Puerto Rico v Bahamas

League C

Group A
Nov 18: Anguilla v Bonaire
Nov 21: Bonaire v Saint Martin

Group B
Nov 16: US Virgin Islands v Aruba
Nov 20: Aruba v Cayman Islands

Group C
Nov 16: British Virgin Islands v Dominica
Nov 20: Dominica v Turks & Caicos

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Radhi Jaidi

Tunisia 2 Saudi Arabia 2

2006 World Cup group stage, Munich

The then-Bolton Wanderers centre-back was a key player for Tunisia at the 2006 World Cup in Germany, and he proved it in his country's first game of the finals

Game-saving goal ...Jaidi celebrates his equaliser

"The World Cup means a lot to Tunisia and myself. I was so proud to represent my country in the biggest venues and at the biggest tournaments. As a young kid growing up, you never think it's going to happen, so it was a huge honour.

On the back of winning the Africa Cup of Nations in 2004, expectations were high. We thought we had a good squad that could push on and achieve more.

Going into the World Cup, our aim was to qualify for the second round. We had the players to do it, but our preparation individually and collectively wasn't good enough. With the greatest respect to Saudi Arabia, we expected to win our first group game ahead of tougher tests against Spain and Ukraine, so only getting a draw was a big setback.

Phones were quite basic back then so I always took a camera with me, and I still have some videos of the build-up. We were a bit nervous but there were a lot of Tunisian fans in Germany. They were outside our hotel, cheering and encouraging us. We were proud and excited, but we felt that responsibility too. This was like a derby between two Arabic countries and there were more than 60,000 fans in the Allianz Arena – one of the best stadiums I played in.

Roger Lemerre was experienced and [was part of the coaching team that] won the World Cup with France in 1998. As a manager, he was very disciplined and strict. He demanded that we stand up to the challenge of the game and the tournament. I remember putting on some music to chill out and take the pressure off, but he told me not to in case I disturbed some of my team-mates, so I went to the showers on the opposite side of the changing room and put my headphones on instead.

Lemerre wanted us to kill the game early on and we started well, scoring after 23 minutes. We were definitely the better side in the first half but we lost control of the game. We conceded an early goal in the second half and then went behind late on. Emotionally, that was difficult for some of the players to deal with – especially the less experienced ones.

At 2-1 down, I took the decision to push up as a striker. We spoke about the "powerplay" at Bolton Wanderers, which is when the big centre-back goes up front towards the end of the game. I remember telling Karim Haggui, my centre-back partner, to get the ball in the box because I'd definitely win some headers and to get players around me to pick up the second ball. That's exactly what happened.

In the last couple of minutes, Haggui launched the ball up the pitch. I won it and put it into space for Ziad Jaziri, who was a quick striker. Then I reset my position in the middle of the area, between the posts. Jaziri crossed the ball and I headed it in. I don't think Lemerre was happy with my decision at first, but it paid off!

The feeling is indescribable. I'd only had it once before, when I scored my first Premier League goal against Arsenal at Highbury. The emotions were so high, I felt like I was flying. It took until a couple of hours after the game, when I was receiving so many calls and messages, to realise that I'd done something amazing."

Interview by Sean Cole

Tunisia
Coach: Roger Lemerre

Jemmali, Chedli, Haggui, Chikhaoui, Boumnijel, Mnari, Namouchi, Jaidi, Jaziri, Bouazizi, Trabelsi

Saudi Arabia
Coach: Marcos Paqueta

Dokhi, Al Ghamdi, Noor, Tukar, Al Qahtani, Aziz, Zaid, Al Temyat, Al Montashari, Kariri, Abdulghani

"Powerplay"...the centre-back wheels away after scoring

> "The emotions were so high, I felt like I was flying"

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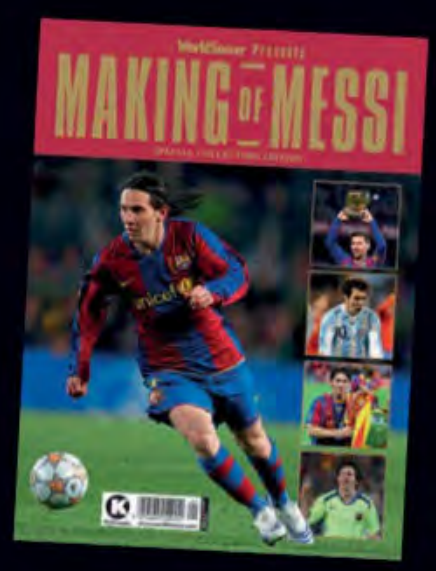

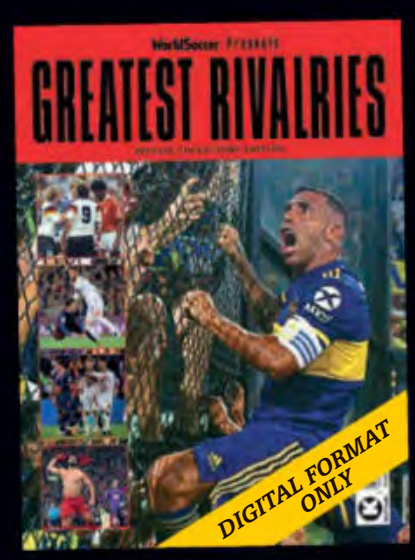

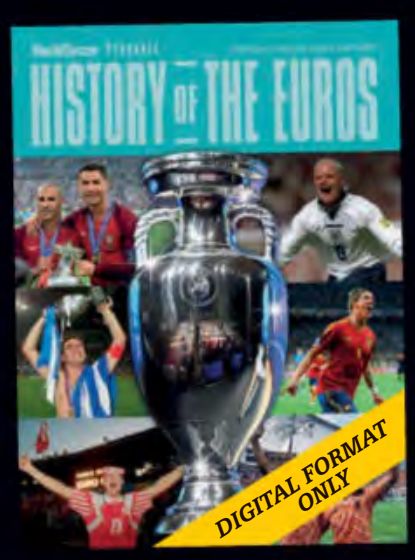

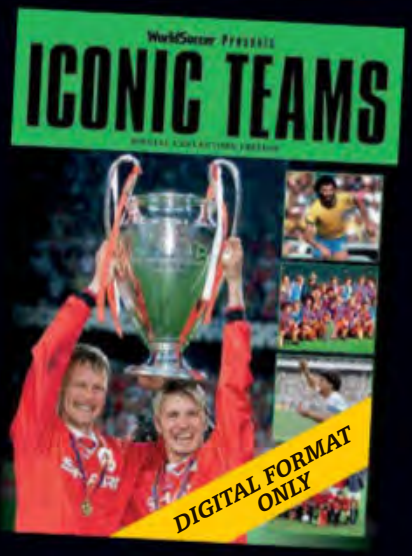

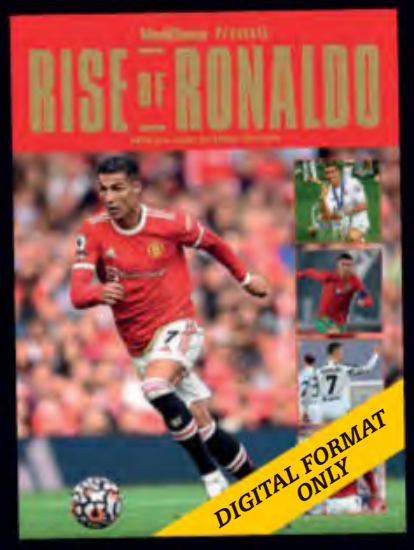

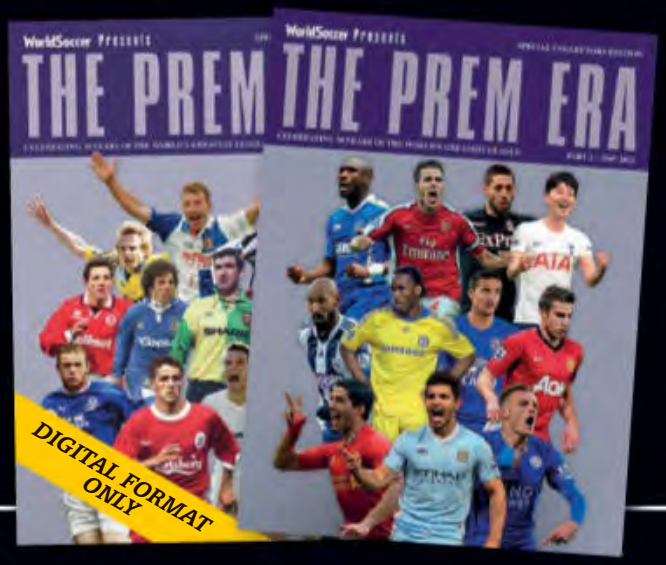

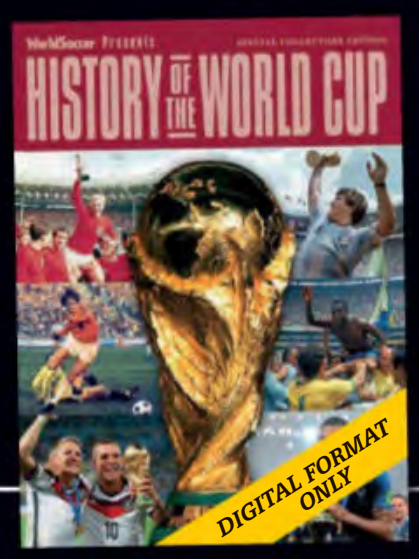

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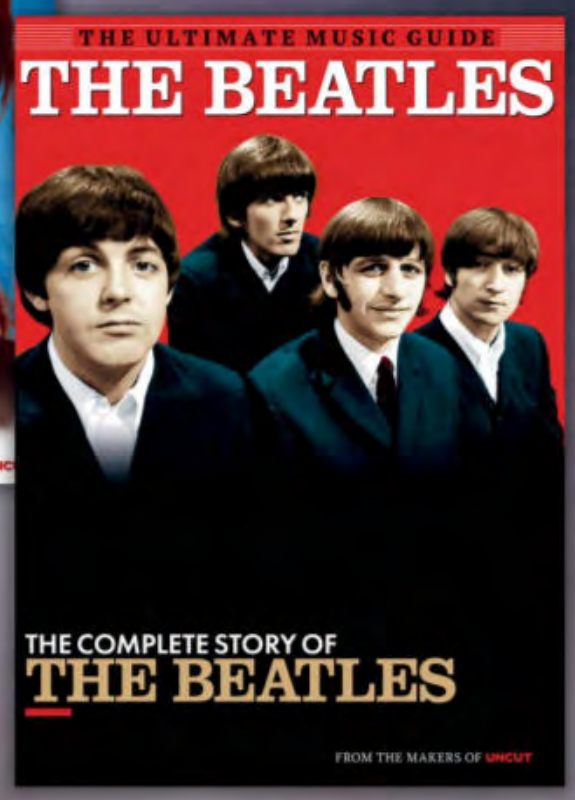

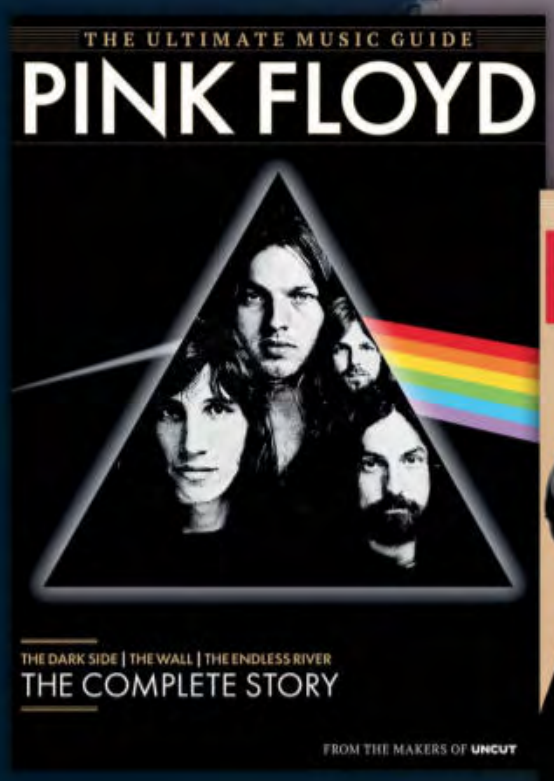

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